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ERIC ALLEN

LONE GUN

A SAVAGE GUNSLINGER RIDES
THE VENGEANCE TRAIL

MH 259

R&H V.R Boyd

MAN'S COUNTRY

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Dodging roving bands of armed riders, Smoke skirted the edges of Blackbird Farm and rode to the crossing on Elk Creek. As he passed the farm, he grew bitter at the sight of new settlers' cabins, and new rail fences criss-crossing meadows where his father's blooded stock once grazed. Hiding in the heavy woodland near Blackbird crossing Smoke met Fox Chuculate and four fullblooded Indians. They lead him almost to the mouth of the creek where Smoke finds his aging father at the point of death.

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AN EXCITING TALE OF THE OLD WEST

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LONE GUN

ERIC ALLEN

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LONE GUN

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LONE GUN

Chapter One

HE HAD traveled for days through the mountains of western Missouri, pointing his course steadily southward and always riding alone. Since leaving Noël and crossing the Arkansas border, he had kept well east of the Cherokee country; but at last, seeing the hills of the Flint District shining in the distance, Smoke Blackbird rode down from the high, cool ridges of Washington County and turned west on the Mission Trace.

Smoke had patroled this road four years before, with Stand Watie's mixed-blood soldiers. Now, looking at the familiar hills about him, he was vaguely astonished that no visible signs of those earlier fights remained.

"Even the ashes of our old council fires are gone," he mused, and had a brief, pleasant feeling that every reminder of violence was behind him, in spite of the strange message he had received at Noel.

Smoke was a quarter-strain Cherokee Indian, and his high-cheeked face distinctly showed it, but his eyes under the stiff black lashes were a penetrating and cool blue-gray. Coarse black hair lay ragged and untrimmed against his temples, buffing out thick and long under the brim of his battered hat. His face had been burned by a powder explosion that had almost taken his life, and the scars were like pieces of torn, wrinkled parchment, showing whitely against his skin. His clothes were durable, but stained from hard days of riding. Belted high on his right hip was a long-muzzled pistol, its butt hand-carved from a slab of chinquapin wood.

He had left this country in the early spring, and now it was spring again. The Mission Trace was the same rough track between walls of tall oak timber, and along the slopes of the higher ridges, flint rocks caught silvery brilliance from the rays of the sinking sun. Violets spread their color on the forest floor, and the seeds of the tongue-grass glistened. Around the fallen oaks stood the dogwood trees in full bloom, like white-clothed guardian angels holding wake over abandoned dead.

Always, on this long trip homeward, dead trees of the forest had spoken strongly to Smoke Blackbird, whispering of old comrades of the Trans-Mississippi Army who would never stand proudly again.

He rounded a turn, forcing the bleak thought from him, and saw a small log cabin at the edge of the road ahead.

Two Indian children raced from a cedar thicket near the cabin, their playful laughter ringing along the road. Smoke slowed his horse as he neared them, feeling a surge of warmth.

"If I hadn't gone to War," he thought, "Belle and I might have had children that size . . . only not that dark."

He smiled, remembering Belle Gentry's fair-skinned face and her red-gold hair, and her eyes with their strange, intriguing challenge. The same dreams he had carried with him throughout the years of War intensified in Smoke Blackbird's heart.

A shrill cry from one of the Indian children suddenly caught his dreams up short. Turning, he saw that they had stopped and were cringing against the wall of the cabin, staring at his face in terror.

Smoke's right hand lifted instinctively, touching the burned splotches on his skin. He rode past the cabin with a growing weight of despondency upon him, wondering what Belle Gentry's reaction would be when she looked at his mottled face.

"A leopard, that's what you are!" a garrulous old raider had told Smoke. "A spotted he-cat with your whiskers singed, and your heart crying blood of the Yankees!"

Memory of the words chilled Smoke now like wind across a frozen bayou. His eyes were narrowed and somber as he looked along the Mission Trace.

He was nearing the remembered junction, where the left-hand road cut south toward the Mission Church. The right-hand turn led northward, passing the old salt licks and the sawmill stands and going on into Stilwell, Indian Territory.

The huge oak stump in the V of the forks was covered with moss and lichens, and no footprints showed on the earth around it as they had in his early youth. Smoke looked at the stump, thinking of the times he had sat here at night with Belle Gentry. This spot had been a trysting place for lovers returning from dances in the isolated Indian settlements. Memories came alive in Smoke, then abruptly faded. His horse had suddenly stopped.

He straightened in his saddle, hearing the grinding of heavy wheels and the pounding of hooves on flint rocks. Presently, surging toward him along the Mission Road, he saw three mule-drawn wagons. Their urgency struck him sharply when he saw that there were families on them, and a picture he had seen too often during the years of War flicked up inside his mind.

It was a picture of refugees fleeing, leaving destruction and death in their wake.

The wagons came on, slowing and halting at the forks in the road. The mules appeared to be almost exhausted. A man and a woman were on the springseat of the leading wagon, and behind the springseat, leaning against the high sideboards, were two small children and a grown girl.

It was obvious that the man and the woman had seen Smoke. They looked at each other uneasily, and then faced ahead and kept staring at him through the early twilight. Even from this distance, Smoke recognized them as long-time tenants of his father's vast Blackbird Farm. He rode forward, lifting a friendly hand.

"Howdy, Frank . . . Mary," he said, and touched his hat to the woman. "Aren't you people traveling late?"

Frank Boyd and his wife stared back at Smoke, their eyes bright and watchful. Not until that moment had Smoke realized fully just how much his face was changed. He said at last, almost wearily, "I'm Smoke Blackbird, Frank."

Recognition made its quick flame in Frank Boyd's eyes, then faded. He said heavily, "Smoke Blackbird . . . I almost didn't know you. What happened to you, Smoke?"

Smoke hid the faint unease that always stirred in him when people looked at his face too intently. He said quietly, "I got burned."

A man called Frank's name impatiently from another wagon, but Frank Boyd ignored him. For a moment there was no sound save the rustle of wind in the treetops and the bellows-like breathing of the halted teams. Smoke felt his eyes drawn past Frank and Mary, and he saw that the grown girl in the back of the wagon was looking at him. When their glances touched, Smoke's eyes stayed upon her.

He sensed at once that her well-groomed look was totally out-of-place among the hard-worn bedding and other household goods which the bed of the wagon held. She was wearing a light blue dress with a white, ruffled bodice, and her dark hair was caught up under a small plumed hat. Evidently, a strand of her hair had shaken loose during the fast, hard run of the wagons, and it trailed to her shoulders now, blowing in the evening wind.

The girl was part Indian, Smoke knew. It showed in the down-slanting lashes over her dusky eyes, and in the dark-ivory smoothness of her quiet, serious face. He searched his mind, trying to remember if Mary Boyd had had a younger sister.

Mary Boyd said quickly, turning to the girl, "Emily, meet Smoke Blackbird. Smoke, meet Emily Rogers."

Smoke took off his hat, watching the girl for some sign of revulsion as she looked into his face. He saw nothing in her eyes except a calm appraisal of him.

"I'm glad to meet you, Miss Rogers," he said.

She said courteously, "I'm glad to meet you, too. Smoke Rising Blackbird . . . isn't that your full name?"

He smiled and nodded. "Who told you that?"

"Your father, and your brother, Cedar. They both talked of you."

Smoke looked at her with increasing interest, liking the way her brows arched above intent dark eyes, and the way her wide-lipped mouth lay softly against her face. The sound of his full name had fallen pleasantly from her lips, the first time he had heard it spoken in years. Smoke's mother had been a white woman, but she had followed an ancient Indian custom, and had named him for the thing that had attracted her attention immediately after his birth . . . smoke rising above the hearth of a

chimney, somewhere in a house in the old Nation in Tennessee.

Mary Boyd said with a strange urgency, "Emily knows both Cedar and your father quite well, Smoke. She's Reverend Rogers' daughter. Reverend Rogers is . . . was pastor of the Mission Church."

Smoke put on his hat and asked eagerly, "How is Cedar? And the old Chief . . . how is he?"

Mary took too long about answering. Smoke looked at Frank, and saw that Boyd's eyes were veiled and evasive.

"What is it, Frank?" Smoke asked.

Boyd's answer was slow, unsteady. "We haven't seen your Dad, nor Cedar either, for about three weeks."

"Why? Where are they?"

"I don't know. Maybe in the Chickasaw country, or in Texas."

"Why? Why aren't they at the farm?"

"The LeQuires wouldn't let them stay."

The name struck Smoke like the insidious touch of a snake's tongue. Muscles tightened in his face, revealing more distinctly the burned splotches on his skin. He said tensely, "Is that bunch making trouble again? Are they trying to take back the farm?"

"Not just trying, Smoke," Boyd answered. "They've dispossessed your father, and taken all the improvements on Blackbird Farm."

Smoke said harshly, "The LeQuires aren't Cherokees, Frank! They don't have a drop of Indian blood in their veins! Dad proved they were intruders once!"

Boyd said bleakly, "They've had that decision reversed, through pull with crooked officials. With the help of a renegade printer in Stilwell, they've formed the LeQuire Commission. For fees paid to that Commission, white settlers are coming in by droves, taking possession of land that belongs to displaced Southern Cherokees. Even some of the loyal Northern refugees are hard hit . . . The Cherokee Government is in a mess, Smoke, and even the U. S. Government keeps stalling off action to protect us from intruders. Some of the once trusted leaders of the Confederate Cherokees have abandoned their principles. They're selling out the blood of their own race in the Councils, just to get concessions for themselves."

Smoke said distinctly, proudly, "My father is Chief Choate Blackbird! He has always had power at Tahlequah and Tahlonteeskee!"

Boyd's eyes were dull, lifeless. "Not now, Smoke. You've . . . maybe you've stayed away too long. Things have changed. Your father is old, broken. When he tried to make a speech at the last Tahlequah Council, armed men swarmed the stand and forced him to leave. He came back, and lived in a cabin close to Fairfield Mission for a while, but he must have known his life was in danger. About three weeks ago, he and Cedar disappeared."

Boyd paused, shifting uneasily under Smoke's steady gaze.

Then, glancing back along the Mission Trace, he went on swiftly, "I'm sorry, Smoke, but we haven't much time for talk. We're the last tenants the LeQuires forced off the farm, and we want to cross the Arkansas line before dark, before some of LeQuire's men overtake us and maybe confiscate all of our household goods. . . . This renegade printer, Mays Ashley by name, solicits funds from intruders to keep the LeQuire Commission in operation. Ashley does that through the pages of a rotten newspaper he prints; and lots of whites who lost their homes in Arkansas and Missouri during the War are glad to pay for a LeQuire Right, just to have a place to live. So-called Indian police enforce every regulation the Commission makes, and people who resist may be murdered."

Because he was a plain-spoken man, and a fighting man, Smoke said bluntly, "Don't you people have guns?"

He heard the choked sound Mary Boyd made, and saw her turn to look at the two small children. Frank's eyes held a dread shine of fear.

"I know what you're thinking, Smoke," he said huskily. "But we can't fight the LeQuires. We have to think of our women and children. Those who have tried to fight have either been forced out of the country, or forced to hide in the woods like animals."

Smoke looked at the other wagons, seeing men and women watching him impatiently across the dusk. He recognized two other old-time tenants of Blackbird Farm, Hosie Walker and Lige Crabtree, but it was obvious that neither of the men had recognized him. Smoke turned, facing Boyd squarely.

"Take your family on to Arkansas, Frank," he said. "Establish them somewhere in safety, then come back here."

Mary Boyd said violently, "No! None of us want our menfolks hiding in the woods like varmints, maybe stealing, way-laying, killing! I won't let my husband stay here, and maybe be murdered!"

Smoke said coldly, "I know ways to stop the LeQuires!"

Frank Boyd drew his breath in audibly. "The LeQuires aren't like they used to be, Smoke . . . at least none of them except Rance. He still traipses over the woods, scouting around for trouble; but Fain and Gratton, they're rich and secure, living in fine homes close to Stilwell, protected by their rotten policemen. Neither of them ever joined the Army, on either side. They stayed home, taking advantage of the confusion caused by the War." Frank paused, then went on urgently. "We've got to hurry, Smoke, but I want to warn you . . . Don't go to the farm tonight, or to Stilwell. Camp off the road, maybe at Rock Springs. Walk careful, and size things up."

Smoke became aware that Emily Rogers was standing very straight in the back of the wagon, but when she spoke, the suddenness of her question shocked him.

"Mr. Blackbird, have you been in a Northern prison?"

"No."

She looked at the gun on his hip, and at his horse with its brush-scarred rigging. "The War has been over for months," she said meaningly.

"Yes." Smoke looked at her for a long moment, and then felt impelled to tell her. "I've been riding with Quantrill, Miss."

The girl looked around at the darkening forest, seemingly confronted by something too black to face. "My father was taken away from the Mission two days ago . . . abducted and . . . and perhaps killed, by masked raiders . . . men like Quantrill's bunch."

Frank Boyd said warningly, "Emily!"

Smoke's piercing eyes held upon Emily Rogers, seeing that all mobility, all warmth had left her expression. When he spoke, his voice sounded flat to his own ears.

"Why should anyone want to kill a Mission preacher?"

Her face held a growing pallor. "Perhaps he isn't dead, as Mr. Boyd seems to think . . . but he was taken away by intolerant men . . . by men who know only the law of the gun; by men who could not, or WOULD not, wait for any kind of arbitration. He was taken away because he preached tolerance, because he wanted the displaced Southern Cherokees reinstated upon their land . . . because he was a good man, wanting fairness, justice! Did Quantrill's raiders ever abduct or kill men that way, Mr. Blackbird?"

Mary said uneasily, "Emily, you're all torn up!"

"No!" Emily Rogers said. "Not deranged with grief, like I know you were thinking when you begged me to leave! I can't believe my father is dead, but if he is, I know he died for a cause, and I shall bear it! It would be easy to follow my carnal mind, and cry Vengeance . . . but I know that violence isn't the answer to our problems here. Resistance, yes; but it must be the passive kind, the meek and lowly kind that God will sanction!" Her dark glance held upon Smoke Blackbird's face for an instant, then she turned back to Mary. "You talked me into coming with you, but I know that this running away won't help. Wherever you go, you'll be confronted by intolerance, because you're a defeated people. Only time can change that. It won't help, either, to do the things that are in Mr. Blackbird's heart! I feel what he is thinking, strongly, and it terrifies me!"

Howie Walker called angrily, "Who is that man up there, Frank? You can stay here talking all night if you want to, but the rest of us are crossing the Arkansas line before dark!"

Frank Boyd lifted the lines to go, then gave Smoke one last warning. "The LeQuires keep some of their hirelings in Stilwell, waiting for refugees and returning soldiers. Some of their riders keep watch on the farm. Camp at the Springs tonight, off the road like I told you, and wait until morning. Good luck."

The wagons pulled on, and Smoke rode past them, turning left

on the Mission Trace. Once he turned in his saddle to look back, and even through the intensifying dusky darkness, he could see Emily Rogers standing in the wagon staring at him. Some strange mute appeal in her eyes reached at him, tugging at things deep in his heart.

He faced ahead again and kept his tired horse traveling. He had ridden with caution since receiving the message in Missouri, but now that caution was intensified. Every rustle of the leaves along the roadside, every snick of a dried twig snapping, came alive in his mind, growing into warnings of imminent danger.

There were no doubts in his mind now about the source of the printed note he had found stuck to his saddle after an overnight stop in Noel. He didn't have to read it again to feel its impact. Unsigned, undated, it had read:

BONES OF MANY DEAD MEN WITHER ON THE BANKS OF ELK CREEK. KEEP TRAVELING SOUTH, OR YOUR BONES MAY REST HERE, TOO!

Chapter Two

SMOKE TURNED off the road at last under cover of the growing darkness, and dismounted at the old Rock Springs. His horse had been well trained to stay near him. He unsaddled and freed the weary animal on the lush hill grass, then stood a moment listening to the sounds around him. Finally, feeling secure under the spring-green canopy of the forest, he built a small fire and cooked and ate.

Later, he sat reclining against his saddle, smoking and thinking of the LeQuires. The old enmity of the clan had never died, he knew now. Brazenly, years ago they had settled on some of the richest Indian land along Elk Creek, and their hatred had become malignant since Chief Choate Blackbird had forced them to leave.

Smoke wondered how the LeQuires had discovered that he had abandoned Quantrill's Raiders and was returning home. He had written to Belle Gentry from an isolated town along the Kansas border; but through some strange intuition, he had asked her to keep his coming quiet. However, the grapevine of the LeQuire clan had always been like the web of some monstrous spider, reaching to every nook and cranny of Cherokee National life. Somehow, Smoke knew, they had traced him. He figured they had hired some derelict scout or an Indian runner to deliver the message to him at Noel.

Smoke thought of his aging father with a downfall of spirit . . . Chief Choate Blackbird, once a great Cherokee leader, a

man for whom mountains, and long green valleys, and crossings of rivers had been named . . . Chief Blackbird, old and stripped of his power, broken and perhaps living among strangers now because of the hatred of Gratton, and Fain and woods-stalking Rance LeQuire . . .

Full night settled and a quarter moon rose, throwing tendrils of muted brilliance against Smoke's face. Sounds of the hills, swelling with the pulse of springtime, lifted in the forest around the springs; the rippling symphony of whippoorwills; the cadence of small-branch frogs; the chirp of crickets and the calls of night birds; the harsh, shrill screeching of owls. Once Smoke stood up when he heard a lone horse coming, and stamped out his fire and stood listening. The horse came from the direction of the Mission, its hooves drawing close at a steady jog trot, passing and diminishing and fading out.

Smoke sought his bedroll at last, fully dressed, placing his gun under his makeshift pillow. The gurgle of the springs was a constant, comforting sound, lulling him to the verge of sleep.

Whippoorwills ceased their calling, and fireflies cut through the dimness about him like blown sparks from some mysterious hidden blaze. Time slid away from Smoke Blackbird, rolling over him in waves of soundless darkness.

Out of that darkness a dream materialized. In the dream a girl was walking toward him. It was strange, Smoke thought in the dream, that there was a great urgency about her, an urgency to reach him; and there was an urgency about him to rise and go to her, but his muscles were bound and he could not rise. Time came back to Smoke suddenly, jolting him into full consciousness with its impact. He sat up, wide awake.

Always, during the War, Smoke Blackbird had had the Indian's instinct of rousing at strange places in the forest and instantly placing his surroundings. He did so now. He knew he was beside the springs, and he looked across them, seeing his horse standing in the moon-thrown shadow of a cedar. He knew also, by the length of the cedar's shadow, that the moon was almost down.

"Mister Blackbird."

Smoke recognized the distinct, courteous sound of her voice at once, and the next instant he saw her. Barefooted, soundlessly, Emily Rogers came from the shadows and stopped near him in the faint glow of the sinking moon.

Smoke reached for his gun instinctively before he rose to his full height. He noticed that she was breathing fast, as though from hard running, as he took a step toward her. Almost curtly, because the sense of danger was crowding against him, he said the first thing that came to mind:

"What are you doing here?"

"I slipped off from the wagons," she said.

"When?"

"Sometime after midnight, after everyone had gone to sleep.

I . . . felt I just couldn't leave here . . . Mr. Blackbird, I'm being followed!"

There wasn't too much fear in her voice, but it revealed itself in the intensified sound of her breathing. Smoke forced that sound out of his hearing, and stood listening with a strung alertness for other sounds that might come to him from the woods. When no alien sounds reached him, he asked at last, "Who's following you? Somebody from the wagons?"

"No." She was hatless now and her hair fell blackly around her shoulders as she moved closer. "It was dark in the thick timber near the forks in the road, and I was walking fast. I didn't see the man until I was almost upon him. He was on horseback, stopped there at the forks. I left the road and hid in the brush, but not before he saw me . . ."

"How do you know he saw you?"

"I heard him get off his horse. He led the horse in my direction and stopped again. He kept waiting there in the road, and once I heard him laugh . . . I was scared. I slipped away. I remembered you'd be camping here, if you did as Mr. Boyd told you . . ."

"Did you hear the man following?"

"Yes." She looked at the gun in Smoke's hand, and a tremor shook her. "Mr. Blackbird . . . ?"

Smoke said calmly, trying to divert her fear, "Miss Rogers, what are you doing barefooted?"

"I think the Boyd's were afraid I'd leave. I saw Mary slip up and take my shoes, right after she thought I had gone to sleep." She took a step closer, her voice going thin. "Mr. Blackbird, will you take me on to the Mission . . . now . . . tonight . . . ?"

Smoke's lifted hand suddenly stopped her. He had heard the faint sound in the brush, and he said on the heels of it, in a reaching, sibilant whisper:

"Hush! Stand there and keep looking here . . . right here, understand me?"

He had stooped, raking the covers of his bedroll together, forming the semblance of a man lying on his side. Smoke backed away from the girl then, into the darker shadows, and stood waiting.

Emily Rogers had grasped his intentions quickly. She stood staring down at his bedroll as if she were reluctant to rouse a sleeping man. The fear that showed in her stance was convincing, wholly because it was genuine. Smoke cocked his gun, muting the click of the hammer, and waited.

There was a short interval of silence, and then the brush parted behind Emily and a man stepped into view. He was dark like a shadow, indistinct in the fading moonlight, but he held something in his hand that glinted.

Smoke's eyes riveted upon that object. He knew it was a gun. He sidestepped, clearing the girl from the line of gunfire, and the

sound he made in the brush with his boots was deliberate. He saw the man stiffen and jerk his gun level. It was pointed directly at Smoke. Smoke fired.

It was from an almost point-blank distance, and there was no urge in Smoke at all to take a chance on miscalculation. He shot the man slightly to the left of center, high in the chest.

It was a credit to her Indian blood, Smoke thought, that Emily Rogers made no outcry. She turned and watched the man's falling body, and then she stepped back as if drawing away from something repulsive, but she made no sound. She stayed that way while Smoke went past her and raked leaves over the embers of his fire and fanned them to life with his hat.

When the flame took hold enough to give him light, he went across to the man's body. He stooped briefly and turned the body over, then straightened up. He broke his pistol and re-loaded it; and when he clicked it shut and sheathed it, the gesture held a touch of finality.

Emily spoke then, turning and shutting the body out of her vision: "Who is it?"

"Rance LeQuire." Smoke moved up close to her. "Rance was always the fox of that family, always slinking around in the brush."

"Is he . . . dead?"

"Yes." Then, seeing the look of horror in her eyes as she glanced at his holstered gun, he said evenly, "Look, Miss Rogers, I'm not in any humor for . . ."

"You killed him," she said.

"Yes. And I'm not in any humor for a sermon on that," Smoke finished.

Her small hands lifted, locking tightly under her breasts. "You could have said something," she whispered. "I didn't mean for you to shoot him down, without saying one word!" A violent reaction was upon her, but she was trying to control it. "Oh, I caused it! I caused this!"

Smoke said sharply, "He was leveling his gun at me! You didn't see that!" He went past her and stooped, catching up his bridle. "I'll catch my horse and take you home."

"Mr. Blackbird!" The desperate strain in her voice stopped him and turned him. She was pointing a shaking hand toward Rance LeQuire's body. "Mr. Blackbird . . . Smoke . . . aren't you going to do anything about HIM?"

Smoke said evenly, "I've never bothered to bury any wolves I shoot, if that's what you mean! To me he was a range wolf, or a lynx cat, seeking out something to kill!"

He wheeled away from her, crossing the spillway of the springs and reaching his waiting horse. His horse was boogered, but it stood there, its head high and the muscles in its neck hard as flint. Smoke slipped in the bit of the bridle and turned, then suddenly stopped.

Emily Rogers was kneeling over the dead man, holding one of

Smoke's blankets in her hands. Her glance, even in the dimness, reached across to Smoke.

"Can you spare this for him, Mr. Blackbird?"

Smoke led his horse toward her without answering. She covered the body quietly and stood up.

Smoke was buckling the cinch of his saddle when Emily came close, carrying the rest of his bedroll. Nervously, she threw it across the horse behind the cantle of the saddle, and stood waiting while Smoke tied it on.

"You needn't bother about taking me on to the Mission," she said. "I'll walk."

He said curtly, "Get up in front."

"I'm not scared now," she said.

Smoke looked at her narrowly. No, he thought, you're not scared now. A man who menaced you is dead, and you're not scared any more. But you're blaming me because I didn't challenge him, didn't take a chance.

"I'm sorry it happened, Mr. Blackbird," she said, and turned to look at the blanket-covered body. When she turned back to Smoke, he sensed her compassion for him, and he didn't want it. He went around her, catching and holding the reins of his horse.

"Get up in front," he repeated. When she still hesitated, he went to her and caught her impatiently, lifting her sideward into the saddle. He caught the impact of her shocked glance, but he ignored it and handed the reins up to her and swung up behind her. They turned away from the springs and the dead man and rode through the woodland and out to the flint-rock road.

Far distant in the hills somewhere a wolf started howling, drawing out forlorn and continuing echoes that brought thoughts of dead men moving into Smoke's mind. He glanced at the dim light of the morning star and thought bleakly, sometime before sun-up, that same wolf . . .

Smoke reached around Emily Rogers and caught the reins of his horse.

"You're right," he said. "You can walk on to the Mission from here. It's almost day."

She turned quickly when the horse stopped, her face so close he could feel the warmth of her breathing. "What do you intend to do?"

"I won't dig a grave for him," Smoke said. "And I won't go tell one of his brothers I killed him. But he must have tied his horse back at the forks. I'll find it, and tie his body on it. The horse will take him to wherever he rode from."

He slid from behind the saddle and waited for her to dismount. She came down close to him, and she didn't move away from him. He sensed the same powerful urgency about her that had struck him when she had looked at him as the wagons had pulled away. It wasn't solely because of the way she looked; it was a feeling that came from the depths of her, and it held him stilled.

She said hesitantly, "There's something I want to say to you.

The first moment I saw you, I felt something strongly. It's a need in you . . ." She paused, watching him as if she were afraid to voice her thought. "Mr. Blackbird, you're desperate, aren't you?"

"Desperate?" The word made its sound in his throat, but it was mostly pulled back into him by his rushing, hard intake of breath. Whatever it was in a man in moments like this, Smoke Blackbird had no time to analyze it. He didn't have to move his booted feet to get hold of her, and he was drawing her in to him almost before he thought.

She drew her breath in sharply and writhed away from him, wheeling as if to run.

He said hoarsely, "Emily! Miss Rogers!"

She stopped and turned back to face him, but there was something about her stance that warned him she would fight him if cornered.

"I didn't mean to do that," he said, his voice heavy with self-condemnation.

She watched him alertly without speaking.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You don't know how long it's been, since I've been that close to a woman."

"I'm sorry, too," she said at last. "God forgive me! I cause things, don't I, not knowing?"

"What did you intend to say?"

"I meant . . . aren't you a desperate man, after all the killing you've done?"

"Is that all you meant to say?"

"No. I might not have left those wagons if I hadn't met you."

He looked at her silently for a moment, then said with a growing frustration, "What are you trying to tell me?"

She threw her hands out swiftly. "Please don't draw wrong conclusions! I mean, I didn't know until then just what my course should be."

"I don't understand you."

She turned to look off into the dark gulf of the valley, and Smoke sensed the same stark feeling of despair in her that had struck him when he had mentioned Quantrill.

"When I first saw you on the road," she said, "I felt that you were desperate and needed guidance. My father always said it's a feeling all true Christians have when they see someone who needs their help . . ."

Smoke said with an edge to his voice, "I don't think I need to hear a sermon."

"Don't you?" She came a step closer, and when she spoke again, her voice was vibrant with intensity. "Oh, Smoke! . . . Mr. Blackbird . . . all the terrible desperation of the War . . . the tragedy . . . it shows on your face! Those scars, those burns . . . they'll always be there, as long as you live, but the scars on your heart can heal if you'll give up this fighting! If you'll learn to practice patience, meekness."

He said incredulously, "Meekness? In front of the LeQuires?"

"I don't mean resignation!" she said quickly. "But there are ways to resist besides that of killing people! Take your look at your home, at all the changes that have been wrought here . . . and then walk softly and make your plans."

"What kind of plans?"

She said determinedly, "Plans to present to officials at the Cherokee Councils. You can win, with patience."

"I'm not a patient man."

"You can be. You're strong. You can take your father's place in the Councils."

Smoke caught the reins of his waiting horse. "There'll be small room for talk in the Councils, or anywhere else, after the LeQuires find out I killed their brother."

She said distinctly, "I need to know something. Ever since we moved here, I've heard rumors, but I need to know. Why do the LeQuires hate you so much, and why do you hate them?"

"I hate them because they're intruders!" Smoke Blackbird said. "I hate them because they slipped in here years ago, like thieves in the night, and started claiming Cherokee blood, and selling rights to land that was given to the Indians as long as water flows and grass grows! I was a kid then, and we lived in Tahlequah. I remember how busy my father was in affairs of the Nation, but he had been planning for a long time to pull out of political life. Hundreds of acres of good land along Elk Creek belonged to him. He wanted to have it cleared, drained, and fixed up for ranching and farming. Even while he was dreaming of a good life in his later years, the LeQuires had slipped in along Elk Creek. They didn't clear the land, or do any work at all. They just claimed Rights to it, and let settlers move in for a price. When the news of what was happening reached my father, he started an investigation, and found out that the LeQuires weren't of Cherokee blood. Through the Cherokee Supreme Court, he had them evicted and classed as intruders. He forced the settlers and the LeQuires off his land, and that's why the LeQuires hate us."

She said despondently, "So you're going to fight the LeQuires, and all their outfit, because they're back on the land they once held?"

Smoke's short laugh had a brittle ring. "I know guerilla tactics, and I figure the woods along Elk Creek are full of men who'll side me. But there won't be any need to fight a big outfit, because there won't be any outfit . . . not after I've killed Fain and Grat!"

He was starting to mount when he sensed Emily's close presence behind him and felt her hand on his arm. He turned to look at her, seeing the dark, loose flow of her hair and the stillness of her face in the dawnlight. A coldness went through him, then subsided, and he was acutely conscious again of her compassion for him. It was stronger than anything he had ever felt from a

woman, even from the nurses during the War. Stronger, even, than anything he had ever felt from Belle Gentry . . .

She said in a small voice, "Mr. Blackbird, unless you stop this violent way you're traveling, all your life, you'll be living under the shadow of Quantrill's flag!"

He looked at her, and then beyond her, thinking how strange it was that this girl's presence, her personality, should strike him so strongly here on this road, so close to the spot that had once been his trysting place with Belle.

"Cedar and your father had a cabin near the Mission," she said urgently. "You can stay there, between trips to Tahlequah and Tahlonteeskee. Don't bring back a reign of terror here, the way it was years ago when the Ridges and the Boudinots were murdered! Take your problem to the Councils, Mr. Blackbird! Please!"

Smoke said roughly, "There's only one kind of action that will stop the LeQuires."

"You're an educated man, Mr. Blackbird. Right-thinking Cherokee leaders will listen to you."

"Not if there's rottenness in the Cherokee Government. Not since my father has lost his power. I doubt if I'd even be allowed to speak. You don't know much about this problem, Miss Rogers. The existence of the Blackbird family has always been a precarious one, held together by sharpness of thought and quickness of action. My ancestors were of the Treaty Party, and old enmities have always dogged our lives. If the Cherokee Supreme Court has reversed the decision my father secured; if crooked politicians are backing the claim of the LeQuires, it may take months, even years, to have them evicted again."

Emily said pleadingly, "You can wait."

"No." He turned from her resolutely and mounted. "You don't know what you're asking me to do, Miss Rogers. I came back to help work the land my family owns. I came back to get married. I don't intend to wait for years."

"Oh," she said, but the word was barely audible. She backed away to the edge of the road and stood watching Smoke turn his horse. Then, before he had completely turned it, she faced about and started walking, her bare feet making almost no sound on the flint rocks and through the tongue-grass.

Smoke pulled his breath in deep and sent his horse at a rapid gait back toward the junction in the Mission Trace.

Chapter Three

He found Rance LeQuire's horse fully rigged, tied in an alder thicket near the forks in the road. A rifle with a scarred stock thrust up from the saddle boot, and a new yellow slicker was tied

securely behind the cantle. A plaited rawhide rope was coiled neatly against the cheek of the saddle's pommel, and dangling from the naked brass horn was a lead-tipped quirt. Smoke dismounted and untied the horse, conscious of a growing distaste for the task he had set himself, and then mounted again and led the horse back to the Springs.

Minutes later, he had Rance LeQuire's stiffening body roped across the saddle. He tied the reins over the horse's neck and slapped it and watched it shy away. The horse went sideward briefly, snorting at its grim burden, and then angled through the timber at a jog trot and struck the road.

Smoke watched the horse take the route toward the Mission, and knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Rance had been staying at Blackbird Farm. As Frank Boyd had warned Smoke, riders were guarding the farm, and Rance had evidently been their leader.

"One down," Smoke Blackbird thought, "and two to go."

His mind was framed by gilt-edged determination as he mounted and turned toward Stilwell. He had traveled a long and grueling road, hoping to find peace and happiness; but now the most ruthless fight of all was before him . . . to either kill Fain and Gratton LeQuire, or chase them out of Indian Territory.

Full day came swiftly, chasing the long shadows westward across the hills. The flint rocks with their coating of dew took on a richer brilliance, and grass along the roadside gleamed and sparkled in the light of the rising sun. Blue jays fought in the towering red-oaks, and dipped through the timber on shining wings; and the leaves of young hickories, big as the ears of a suckling fawn, lost their night's lethargy and waved in the morning wind. Love for the hills rose strongly in Smoke Blackbird, striving to push out his hatred for the LeQuires; and the struggle between love and hatred only confused his mind.

He slowed his horse as he neared the remembered side road leading toward the Gentry place, and thought with a strange reluctance, "I ought to go see Belle, before I brace the LeQuires."

He was puzzled at his own reluctance, and asked himself wonderingly where his eagerness had flown. How was it that a man could carry a dream of a woman for so long a time, and then suddenly find that dream lacking strength and substance? Was it because of his meeting with Emily Rogers?

He shrugged that thought aside. There had been too much between Belle Gentry and Smoke Blackbird for a chance meeting with another woman to wipe out.

A cavalcade of riders suddenly broke into view from the direction of Stilwell, traveling swiftly toward Smoke. They were still at a goodly distance, and he knew that the sandy stretch in the road beyond the curve had muted the hoofbeats of their horses. Smoke did not waste time condemning himself for a momentary lack of caution. He hadn't planned a course of stealth, and it was

too late to plan it now. He rode on, shifting the weight of his gun forward on his hip.

The riders came on and fanned out and halted, blocking the narrow road. There were four of them, all fully armed, and though none of them spoke at first, their ruthless stares warned Smoke to halt. He pulled his mount in slowly, reining slightly to the left and stopping with his holstered pistol clearly in their visions. His glance was cool and all-inclusive, calmly appraising them.

A thin-faced man on a huge bay horse seemed to be their leader. He was a tall man with slightly drooping shoulders, wearing a flat-crowned hat and a swallowtail coat, and a rust-brown shirt with a black string tie knotted loosely about his throat. He had the tail of his coat thrust back with his elbow, and he wore his pistol without a scabbard, pushed snugly down under his belt. All four riders were strangers to Smoke.

"Morning," the thin-faced man said crisply. "Fine day for traveling, ain't it?" He smiled and looked at the cobalt sky.

In spite of the man's smile, their hostility was plainly visible. Smoke's life had never run to deception in front of such men. He merely nodded.

One of the men laughed and said thinly, "We've met us a quiet one, Murtch."

"Yeah." Murtch smiled again, and then shifted his weight on his saddle. He glanced at Smoke's gun, and then back to Smoke's face. "Stranger here, ain't you, mister?"

"No."

Murtch straightened, and the toe of his left boot started tapping inside the stirrup. The other three men sat their saddles loosely, nonchalantly, openly showing their contempt for Smoke. One of them was a squat man with gorilla-like shoulders and a heavy, florid face. The others were small men, wiry. Brothers, Smoke Blackbird thought.

Murtch's foot ceased its restless tapping. He leaned forward. "Mind telling us gents your name?"

"I'm Smoke Blackbird."

Sometime far back, Smoke thought, Murtch had been young and virile and dangerous. Perhaps he was dangerous now, but it would be in a stealthy way. Smoke watched Murtch's reaction and knew the kind of man he was; a man whose constitution had been ravaged by hard liquor and overindulgence in women; a man burned out before his time. Murtch's heart was weak; it showed in his growing pallor and the sound of his shortened breath.

Smoke's eyes left Murtch and fastened upon the others. Their cool nonchalance had left them at the first sound of his name. They had snapped to a quiet erectness in their saddles, and their faces were devoid of contempt. The squat one looked dangerously belligerent.

"We're Cherokee officers," Murtch said uneasily. "We'll have to take you in."

Smoke smiled. "In to where, Murtch? And to whom?"

Murtch's pallor increased. "I think Mr. LeQuire would like to talk to you."

"Which Mr. LeQuire?"

"Why . . . ah . . . Fain, or Gratton either. They . . ."

The squat man said stridently, "Hell, Murtch, you don't have to explain to him! Let Huck and Chain go on after Ashley. You and me, we'll take this jasper in!"

Murtch's lips thinned out. "Don't crowd things, Arch." He grasped at the decision, but in the way of a weak man who knew he was slipping. He reversed it. "You take Chain and go on after Ashley. Huck and I'll take Mr. Blackbird in."

Smoke said quietly, "Let's see your credentials, Murtch. None of you fellows look like Cherokees to me."

He let the weight of his cool voice go against them, but he did not wait for something he knew would not be forthcoming. They needed a more decisive leader, he thought, and with the thought his right hand dipped and came up and forward, holding his long-muzzled pistol. With an insight born of years of dangerous living, he leveled the gun at Arch.

Arch had started to draw his gun, but he stopped it; his eyes bulged slightly and a darkness went across them. Murtch froze in his saddle, drawing in a strangled breath. Chain and Huck stayed as they were, and their faces underwent no changes. They were two of a kind, Smoke thought, both having an iron control of their reflexes. Those two, and Arch, were the dangerous ones.

Arch's eyes lost their flatness, their darkness. They flared. "You're crazy, Blackbird!" he said. "You're going to push us, make us kill you, instead of letting us take you in to Grat!"

"You'll be dead, Arch. *YOU* won't kill me!"

"Like hell I won't!"

Murtch said warningly, "Arch!"

Smoke watched Arch's face flame, and saw the fast beat of blood in his neck. With a stark and visible reluctance, Arch turned to stare at Murtch.

"What are you going to do, Murtch?" he demanded. "Let this jasper slip out of our hands?"

Murtch licked dry lips and didn't answer. Arch swiveled back to face Smoke.

"I'll blast you out of that saddle, Blackbird!"

"Not you, Arch. Maybe Chain, or Huck, or even Murtch. But not you."

"You're bluffing!"

Smoke cocked his gun with the ball of his thumb and watched Arch's glance rivet upon its muzzle. "Why don't you try me, Arch?"

The bright morning sun lay harshly against Arch's face, drawing out each florid detail. He was obviously an unimaginative man, but the flaring muzzle of Smoke's gun pushed imagination

pride and asserted its purpose grimly. Perhaps Arch had subsided inwardly, even before Chain spoke:

"That gun's got a slug like a minie ball, Arch! It'll take out half your guts!"

Arch made his decision swiftly, and lifted the reins to ride.

"Slow," Smoke warned. "All of you, slow and easy, get past me and don't turn around."

"We were fixing to take this side road," Murtch said unsteadily. "Is that all right?"

Smoke nodded. "Not back toward Stilwell, though. Start moving!"

They moved at once, easing their horses into the side road and increasing their pace with distance. They were going at a hard lope when they reached the dip in the road under the bluff. Smoke watched them circle the bluffs and go out of sight through the trees; and then the question that had flicked into his mind gained magnitude.

Why were LeQuires' riders going toward the home of the Gentrys?

The question was still strong in his mind as he holstered his gun and rode on. He quelled with an effort his urge to follow them and find out. They had said they were going after a man named Ashley; and Ashley was the name Frank Boyd had mentioned . . . Mays Ashley, a renegade printer in Stilwell, the man whose paper was backing Fain and Gratton LeQuire.

Smoke said to himself, in the manner of a man who has spent weeks traveling alone, "I'll have to see you later, Belle . . . Maybe much later." He thought of his temporary victory over the LeQuire riders then, and the thought held a vague compensation. He was smiling wryly as he rode on.

It was eight fifteen by his big silver watch when he came in sight of Stilwell. He halted on the flat top of the ridge briefly and looked at the town, and had a temporary feeling that four years had never been. Ten times four years, he thought, would have left the town much the same. Brick and clapboard buildings lined either side of a wide, wheel cut street, and crunning away from the street were the side streets and the grass-grown alleys; and on out and beyond the dwindling side streets were the houses and farms.

It could be a wild town, Smoke Blackbird thought, flush with hatred, and evil as other towns he had passed. Or it could be the serene and peaceful town it had once been, a trading center for Indians. From this distance, at this early hour and with traffic at a standstill, it was hard for a man to tell. Smoke wondered which houses sheltered Fain and Gratton LeQuire.

He rode down the slope past the blacksmith shop and halted and dismounted in front of the livery.

"You grazed all night," he said to his horse, slapping the animal's shoulder affectionately. "But I guess you can stand some oats."

Reluctantly, he turned the horse over to a bleary-eyed hostler who was obviously coming out of a drunk. The hostler showed very little interest in Smoke's instructions, because his interest was centered upon his own sickness.

"How much does a pint cost, pardner?" Smoke asked.

The hostler sighed. "Six bits." A dim hope flickered in his eyes. "You aimin' to drink it here?"

Smoke smiled and pressed the money into the man's shaky palm. "I don't drink, but you need a bracer, before you take care of my horse."

It was temporary reprieve from a desperate plight, and the hostler's eyes showed his thankfulness. "I'll take good care of this horse, mister! I'll make him shine!"

Smoke waited until the hostler had led his horse under the livery archway. Then, turning, Smoke entered Main Street, walking with a leisurely stride.

His heavy cavalry boots drew the same hollow thudding from the wooden sidewalk, and lifted the same familiar echoes from the fronts of the many stores. Most of the signs on the store-fronts were ones he remembered, but the buildings seemed bleak and neglected, all needing new coats of paint. Glancing into a narrow alley, he saw two men passed out dead drunk. Beyond the alley was a small brick building with a plate glass front, and above the glass hung a neat new sign with fancy-looking lettering: FLINT DISTRICT REGISTER. M. ASHLEY, EDITOR.

Smoke's face tightened perceptibly, and then he smelled the aroma of cooking food as he approached Gilbey's Restaurant. He opened the door of the restaurant and went in.

He paused just inside and let his eyes adjust to the dimness, then turned and hung his hat on the deer prongs beside the door. One man, a fullblood Indian in a floppy black hat, occupied a stool at the far end of the counter. Smoke gave the Indian a close look as he sat down. The Indian was not eating; he had one elbow propped on the counter, his chin resting in his hand. He tilted his head sideward and looked at Smoke, and the white showed fleetingly around his liquid-black eyes, then vanished under a narrow watchfulness.

"Got pork side, gravy, stew," the Indian said. He grinned at last with a show of white buck teeth, but the grin didn't stay long. "Pork side good." He smacked his lips.

Smoke smiled. "You running this place now?"

The Indian grimaced and shook his head. "My squaw cook. Good cook . . . for Gilbey. Good squaw. Got pork side, gravy, stew . . ."

"Where's Gilbey?"

The Indian shuddered. "Him out back, eat grass like sick dog maybe . . . maybe die."

"Drunk?"

"Sick. Sick drunk." The Indian unpropped his chin and let his head doddle forward. He blew through his lips, making sound like

that of a snorting horse. "Big dance last night. Big weddin'. Choc' beer, whisky. Ever'body sick!"

A fat Indian woman appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and smiling at Smoke. "You want eat, man?" she asked.

"Pork side and gravy," Smoke said. "And scrambled eggs."

"Coffee?"

Smoke's brows lifted. "If you have it. No ground bark, though, or roasted acorns."

She grinned expansively. "Mr. Gilbey, he Mr. LeQuire's friend. Mr. Ashley's friend. Gilbey get much coffee, last night, serve food for weddin'!" She hesitated, looking at Smoke intently, then said without much conviction: "Those LeQuire, that Ashley . . . they good men."

Smoke asked with a touch of impatience, "Who got married? Ashley, or one of the LeQuires?"

The Indian woman's face got still, attentive. Beyond her, the Indian man pulled himself straight on the stool. The Indian woman came close to Smoke and peered into his face. "You not here last night? What your name, man?"

"Smoke Blackbird."

The Indian woman turned quickly and looked at her husband, then back to Smoke. At that moment the front door opened and a man came in. He was a small, nervous man, bareheaded and wearing a wrinkled suit that was a couple of sizes too large for him. He took the stool next to Smoke and leaned across the counter. He said throatily to the Indian woman, "Coffee, Sally. Black, please, and put in a spoonful of soda."

Smoke's nostrils caught the rank smell of stale whisky, and he looked narrowly at the man's pasty face. The man avoided Smoke's glance and reached back and pulled a folded newspsaper from his hip pocket. He was so nervous the paper crackled in his hands, making sound like a rattlesnake's warning. He spread it out.

"Look's like everyone's sleeping late this morning," Smoke remarked.

"I didn't." The man gave Smoke a flicking sideward glance out of reddened eyes. "I haven't been drunk, either, if that's what you're thinking. Just a few snorts to keep me working. Took me all night to get this out, but it's worth it." He slid the paper over in front of Smoke. "Look at that, mister! I jeckon that'll suit M. Ashley. Pictures and all the frills!"

Smoke glanced at the paper idly at first, then his attention centered. He took the edges of the paper reluctantly, as if it were a deadly dangerous thing, and lifted it in front of his eyes.

"That girl in this big picture . . . the one in the white dress," he said. "Isn't that Belle Gentry?"

"Not now. Since last night, Miss Belle has been Mrs. Mays Ashley!"

Chapter Four

SMOKE FELT the paper drawn from his hands, and he turned with a strange abstraction, watching the man fold it and return it to the pocket of his baggy trousers. The ever-tightening seconds dragged past Smoke then, while the numbing news seeped into him; and he quelled with an effort a sudden urge to rise and go out into the open where he could find ample room to breathe.

His stifling growth of despair built up to the verge of panic, then subsided, held in leash by the iron-clamped hold of his will. Quite suddenly, he remembered his reluctance to see Belle when he had slowed at the side road leading to her home. He remembered the swift, overpowering rush of weakness that had made him attempt to take Emily Rogers in his arms; and his honesty and Indian superstition made that breach a gross infidelity that had caused this.

The Indian woman brought a platter of food and slid it in front of him, then turned and poured two cups of steaming coffee. She set one cup beside Smoke's platter and the other in front of the nervous printer. Turning ponderously, she returned toward the kitchen, and as Smoke's glance followed her, he noticed something that had escaped him during the stress of the preceding moments.

The Indian man who had been sitting at the far end of the counter was gone.

It was a small thing, but the fact ran sharply into Smoke's senses, cutting the paralyzing threads of despair that had bound his mind at the news of Belle's marriage.

When the Indian woman reappeared, he watched her narrowly, but her dark face was unfathomable, holding a stoical and effective calm. She stopped in front of Smoke and said quietly, "You eat, man. You hungry."

There was a gnawing void of emptiness in Smoke Blackbird, but it was not like hunger, though hunger had been there before. Determinedly, he picked up his knife and fork and began to eat, but the food was tasteless, no longer a succulent and life-sustaining substance. He forced down the greater portion of it, and drank his coffee and stood up. He took out his money pouch and unsnapped the brass nubs of it, conscious of the nervousness that was running out through his fingers. He handed the Indian woman a dollar, waited while she made the change, and then turned slowly and took his hat from the deer prongs beside the door. He put on his hat and pulled it down tight and square, and touched the point of his right shoulder against the door and went out.

He crossed to the edge of the walk and paused, looking along the length of Main Street. The neat sign above Mays Ashley's newspaper office thrust out against his vision, mocking him; and suddenly the fury and frustration came roiling up inside him, flushing his face and drawing out sharply the burned splotches on his skin.

He was standing that way when the pounding of hoofbeats tumbled against his hearing. He turned with a rash hope building in him, and saw Chain and Arch trailing a red-wheeled buggy down the slope of the road and into the street.

One man was on the seat of the buggy, his gloved hands holding the lines of the fast-stepping horse.

The top of the buggy was down and the sturdy shape of the man was clearly visible. He was of compact build, wearing a close-cropped mustache, neatly-trimmed sideburns and a small pointed goatee. He had on a high beaver hat and a dark serge frock coat; the coat was open, and a long black tie stood out with neat conspiciousness against the front of his shirt. When the buggy swerved toward the curb and pulled up in front of the newspaper office, Smoke Blackbird knew he was looking at Mays Ashley.

That knowledge intensified Smoke's rashness. He squared around. When Ashley wound the lines around the whipstock and set the brake with his foot and climbed down, Smoke was before him, standing implacably.

Smoke had known at once that Ashley was aware of his presence. Perhaps Arch and Chain had spotted Smoke and warned the editor, the moment the buggy had entered town. Ashley paused beside the buggy, flicking dust from his coat and watching Smoke out of wide-open, slightly protuberant eyes. Behind him, Arch and Chain made distance between their horses, moving them on either side of the buggy and waiting.

Mays Ashley said with surprising courtesy, "You're Smoke Blackbird?"

Smoke gave Ashley his cold appraisal and stood without answering.

Ashley gestured toward the newspaper office. "We'll talk inside."

"Will we, Ashley?" Smoke didn't move.

Ashley took out a small black cigar and put it in his mouth, watching Smoke all the while. He said, "There's room for some talk between us, Blackbird. You ought to realize that."

"You say your part of it then, Ashley. Right here."

Ashley's smooth face lifted. "You don't expect me to discuss my affairs on the street?"

"Why not, Ashley? Have you got some secret to hide?"

Ashley's mustache twitched, and a cold intolerance flattened his lips. "I heard you'd be a difficult man to handle, Mr. Blackbird. I'm impatient with rude, tactless people. You heard what I said. We can discuss this thing quietly, unobtrusively, in my office."

"What thing?" Smoke prodded. "That message you had delivered to me at Noel, Missouri? Is that it?"

Ashley's face turned darkly crimson. He wheeled suddenly and looked at Arch and Chain.

Arch said ominously, "Mr. Ashley, those orders you gave us . . . do they still hold?"

"Certainly!" Mays Ashley snapped. "And I want another thing

understood, Arch. I know nothing about any message to Blackbird. You remember that, too, Chain."

"You're a liar, Ashley," Smoke Blackbird said.

Ashley spun back to face Smoke. Arch made a sound in his throat like the growl of a goaded mongrel, then said harshly, "Mr. Ashley, how much can you stand of this?"

"Shut up!" Ashley said. "Ride out of here, both of you! I'll handle my affairs myself!"

Smoke said quietly, "Are you sure you can do that, Ashley? Are you sure you won't need some help?"

The flush drained out of Ashley's face, leaving it starkly pale and tense. "You aren't thinking of . . . doing something violent, are you, Blackbird?"

"I'm a violent man, Ashley, along with my rudeness. Didn't you hear that, too?"

Smoke heard Arch curse, and saw him knee his horse sideward. Arch's hand didn't touch his gun, but his fingers were close to the scabbard; so close that the sight drew an immediate challenge from Smoke Blackbird:

"Go ahead and try to draw it, Arch!"

"No!" Mays Ashley cried. "No, Arch!"

Smoke dared not take his gaze from Arch, but he became aware of movement across the street; vague shapes of men coming out of an alley in single file, bunching briefly and then spreading out, lining along the sidewalk. When at last Smoke saw Arch sag visibly in his saddle, and knew that danger from him had passed, Smoke sent a swift look across to those men and saw that they were Indians. They were fullbloods, all six of them, dark-garbed woodsmen holding long rifles in their hands, their sloe-black eyes fastened upon Smoke. A thought came to Smoke when he recognized the Indian he had seen in Gilbey's Restaurant. So the Indian had slipped out as soon as he had heard Smoke's name. The Indian had known that Ashley was due in town, and he had rounded up cronies to back the editor . . . Smoke Blackbird spoke the thought harshly, straight into Mays Ashley's face:

"You capture all the odds, don't you, Ashley? A whole army at your back!"

Reluctantly, Mays Ashley turned and looked at the Indians. Then he glanced at Arch and Chain. When he turned back to Smoke, the editor's face had changed subtly. He said with surprising softness: "I have things to tell you, Blackbird, if you'll enter my office."

Smoke had been schooled to a sharp perception all of his life, and now he was aware of a faint puzzlement that he had no time to unravel. That puzzlement was intensified by the strange look on Ashley's face, and the way Arch and Chain had stilled in their saddles. Their stillness could have been the stillness of waiting, or of fear.

Sight of the Indians had struck no fear into Smoke Blackbird,

but he was not entirely a foolhardy man. Their presence had had power enough to smooth out his rashness.

"All right, Ashley," he said, and watched Ashley move past him toward the newspaper office doorway. Arch and Chain wheeled their horses and rode off down the street.

Smoke waited a moment, watching the Indians. They looked at each other, their dark faces slack and unsmiling; then they turned, forming a single-file column, and vanished into the mouth of the alley.

Smoke followed Mays Ashley inside the office, watching the editor take a chair behind a roll-top desk.

"Take a chair, Blackbird," Ashley said.

"I'll stand, Ashley. Do your talking fast."

Ashley shifted papers on the desk top. "You're an impatient man, Blackbird." He sighed. "Well, to the point, then. I DID send you that message."

"Sure. You and the LeQuires."

"The LeQuires knew nothing about that message," Ashley said.

"You're two times a liar now, Ashley."

"I tell you, they knew nothing about it! I printed it and sent it myself!"

"Why?"

Ashley leaned back in his chair. "It wasn't a warning to keep you from coming home, Blackbird. I've heard too much about you to ever get the idea that you'll . . . well . . . scare. I meant the message as a challenge, something to bring you home quickly. I didn't want you to stall around for maybe months, drifting around the river towns like lots of ex-soldiers have done. I wanted you back here, because I had to be sure . . ." He paused.

"Sure of what?"

Ashley stood up, seemingly moved by a tremendous force that would not let him rest. "You know how it is with a man . . . wanting to be sure of a woman. Belle . . . Miss Gentry and I had set the date for our wedding, and she seemed eager, but I couldn't bear the thought that you'd come back after we were married, that she would see you, and have doubts . . ."

The man's frankness amazed and sickened Smoke Blackbird. "Belle showed you my letter, then," he said. "That's how you knew I had abandoned Quantrill?"

"Yes. She wanted to move up the date of our wedding . . . wanted to get it over too quickly, I thought, after she received your letter. That made me cautious. I'm a cautious man, Mr. Blackbird."

Smoke could only stare at Ashley with open contempt.

"I got the idea she was afraid of something," Ashley went on brazenly. "Maybe afraid that she wouldn't want to marry me after she saw you again. You understand what I mean?"

"Why don't you tell me everything, Ashley?" Smoke muttered.

"Every rotten thing you've ever thought or dreamed, all through your life?"

Ashley flushed, but went on with a hard insistence, "Every man with property feels that dread that a woman is marrying him for his money. As I said, I had to know. I stalled her, and then I hired four scouts to try to intercept you, to give you the message that would bring you back hurriedly, so I would know. Two of the scouts went north on the Osage Trace toward the border of Kansas. One followed the Arkansas line. The other . . . well, he found you at Noel, Missouri."

Smoke heard the front door open behind him, and he turned warily and saw the man in the baggy suit. The man paused uncertainly, then said with feigned exuberance, "Mr. Ashley, have you looked at the finished edition? The pictures, they . . ."

Ashley made an imperious gesture and said shrilly, "Get out!" The man stopped as if a battering ram had struck him, and then wheeled around and made a hasty exit.

"Blackbird," Ashley said abruptly, "I want to make a deal with you."

"What kind of deal?" Smoke queried.

"I'll give you two thousand dollars to leave here and never come back."

Smoke Blackbird smiled tauntingly. "Because you're afraid I'll see Belle?"

"No." Ashley smiled also, and looked straight into Smoke's face. "I didn't have any worries about Belle and you after that scout got back and told me how you looked. You aren't the man I saw in the picture she showed me once."

Smoke stared at Ashley. "Just what are you driving at?"

Ashley's eyes grew bright and mocking with the flare of some avid and relished thought. "Why, you've lost your looks, Blackbird," he said. "Do you think I'm worried about a beautiful woman like Belle wanting you now, and you with your face all twisted and blemished with leopards' spots?"

Smoke's forward move was like the fluid run of a catamount's leap, taking him against the desk. He leaned across it before Ashley could duck or sidestep, and took a handful of necktie, shirt and coat. He heaved Ashley in to him and hit him; a deliberately glancing blow that tore down across Ashley's face. Ashley blanched as the pain of the ripped flesh tore through him, and made a strangled sound that barely escaped his throat. Smoke hit him again and then held him back and said harshly, "Say that again, damn you! Look at me and say that again!"

"Don't! . . . Please don't beat me!" Ashley pleaded.

Savagely, Smoke flung him back against the swivel chair, and then circled the desk to confront him.

"My God, Blackbird!" Ashley whimpered. "Don't hit me again!"

Smoke quelled his rage and said with deceptive quietness, "I'll

give you a minute to tell me, Ashley. Why are you trying to pay me to leave?"

Ashley said through his bloody lips, "I don't want the LeQuires to kill you! I don't want any more killings here!"

"You're lying again, Ashley!"

"No!" Ashley said desperately. "I've preached it to Gratton and Fain and Rance, over and over! We can't have any more killings here! If it isn't stopped . . . if they don't stop the depredations of Rance and his crew, the Army will be sent here! The Army will ruin us, tear up all our plans!"

"Do you think I'd sell out the blood of my family, my people, for two thousand dollars of your filthy cash?"

"You have no choice, Blackbird! If you refuse, the LeQuires will have you murdered!"

"Do the LeQuires know I'm here?"

"Yes. We stopped on our way in, and told them. They keep four professional killers, guarding their places at all times! They wanted to send those killers here to take you, but I pleaded with them, told them I could handle everything . . ."

"Go tell them you couldn't, Ashley!"

"No! Mr. Blackbird . . ."

"Where is my father, and Cedar?" Smoke cut in.

"I don't know."

Smoke's piercing stare held Ashley rooted. "I know why you don't want me to be killed, Ashley! You know my father still has friends! If word gets out that I've been murdered . . . shot in the back from ambush, or killed by a band of ruffians . . . men will be here to kill you and Fain and Grat!"

Smoke watched the force of his words strike home, and he started to wheel away.

"Wait!" Ashley cried. "Let me tell you the thing I brought you here to tell you! Choate Blackbird is through in the Cherokee National Council . . . through in this country for good! He came back here from Tahlequah and told people that armed men had forced him off the stand! But I know differently. No one touched him, but he wouldn't speak because he couldn't look into the faces of his old friends, knowing they knew the truth!"

"The truth about what?"

"Why, about Cedar, of course." Ashley took out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from his lips. "You know about Cedar, I guess . . . or has your father kept it from you all these years . . . the skeleton in his closet that finally ruined him?"

"Speak plainer, Ashley!"

"Cedar isn't really your brother. Didn't you know that?"

"He's my half brother. I've known that for years."

Ashley smirked. "Did you know that his mother was a colored slave girl . . . a wench your father shacked up with while your mother was carrying you?"

Unleashed fury sent Smoke toward Ashley. Ashley spun the chair in front of him and stood cringing. Then, because Ashley's words had plucked chords of an old suspicion, Smoke Blackbird paused.

"I'm telling the truth, Blackbird!" Ashley said. "Rance LeQuire found the proof!"

"What kind of proof?"

"A letter to you from your mother, written just before she died. Rance and some men rode to the farm as soon as the Cherokee Supreme Court reinstated the LeQuires as Cherokee citizens. Rance confiscated all of your father's personal property, before your father could move or hide anything. Rance found the letter in an old trunk."

"Where is that letter now?"

"I suppose it's on file at the Cherokee Capitol. You'll never get it." Ashley's assurance was returning rapidly. "Evidently, according to the letter, your mother was afraid your father would never tell you the truth about Cedar. Perhaps she thought old Choate would never have the nerve. I think, however, she must have got your father's promise not to open the locked trunk. Maybe they agreed, when she was close to death, to let you open the trunk when you reached a certain age. It contained many personal items which your mother wanted you to have; but then, the War broke out, and you left home . . ."

Smoke interrupted coldly, "I don't believe anything you're saying!"

Ashley watched Smoke intently. "I think you do, Blackbird. Why didn't your father ever send Cedar to the Mission Schools?"

"Cedar was backward, slow," Smoke said. "He fell out of a tree once, and damaged his head on a rock. He couldn't learn things, not things from books . . ."

"That's a lie your father told you!" Ashley said flatly. "He didn't send Cedar to school because he knew Cedar wouldn't be accepted! Some tribes of Indians might have accepted a Negro child, but not the Cherokees. Your father knew that. Didn't you ever get suspicious about how black Cedar is, how his fuzz kinks up like hair from a buggy cushion? Answer me that?"

Smoke stood silently, giving Ashley a cold and continuing stare.

Ashley said hurriedly, "I'm telling you this because you need to know how you stand here; need to know the disgrace that has stripped your father of his power. He forced your mother to take the child when the Treaty Party left the Old Nation. Having to raise that colored offspring of your father's sent your mother to an early grave. She had much to say about her despair in the letter she left you."

A thought came to Smoke, bringing a renewed surge of anger. "I guess you printed that letter in your paper, didn't you, Ashley?"

Ashley watched Smoke and nodded tensely. "I felt that people should know the truth."

"I ought to kill you with my bare hands, Ashley!"

Ashley's breath stuck in his throat. He said finally, "You'd be hanged or shot down within an hour. You'll leave here, just as your father and Cedar left here. I'm offering you enough money to get you as far as you want to go."

Smoke turned away slowly, aware that out of his sickness and anger was being born a murderous hatred for Mays Ashley. It was like fire raging under the cover of his strong willpower, consuming his vitals and licking into his throat in its effort to be unleashed.

Only after he had reached the door could he trust himself to speak. He turned there and looked at Ashley, and said through the constriction in his throat:

"Maybe I'll travel as far as Elk Creek. You remember that, and go tell the LeQuires!"

He faced about and reached the sidewalk and paused there; a lean man, standing not with the stance of the hunted, but quietly, alertly, as the hunter stands. When he heard the door of Gilbey's Restaurant opening, he turned warily to face that sound and saw the Indian in the floppy hat.

The Indian's lips were pulled tightly together, making an arc across his buck-teeth. His eyes were like drops of obsidian, holding steadily upon Smoke. The Indian's lips moved almost imperceptibly after a moment.

"My name is Fox Chuculate," he said softly in flawless English. "Ride to Blackbird Crossing on Elk Creek. Hide there and wait."

The Indian's left arm moved away from his side, throwing his hand palm-forward. Smoke's eyes caught the flash of light from the object in the Indian's hand, and his attention riveted upon it.

He was looking at his father's watch fob; a gold piece with the image of a flying blackbird stamped upon it. Fox Chuculate, Smoke thought, could lead him to his father . . .

Chapter Five

THE INDIAN pocketed the watch fob and turned down the sidewalk, moving with a lithe, slightly toed-in stride. He turned right at the first cross-street and vanished, and only then was Smoke aware of a brief distrust.

His father's watch fob could have been stolen, Smoke knew. Choate Blackbird could be dead, murdered, and Fox Chuculate could be leading Smoke into a trap.

Yet, the events of the past several hours had sharpened Smoke's perceptions, and some swift intuition warned him to trust the Indian. Smoke remembered how Chuculate and his fullblood companions had lined up across the street behind Mays Ashley's buggy. He remembered the strange look on Ashley's face, and the

uncertainty that had plainly caught Arch and Chain. A subtle undercurrent of excitement had struck Smoke at the time, and now memory of it swept away his vague suspicions. He felt sure that Fox Chuculate's slovenly appearance and broken English inside Gilbey's restaurant had merely been part of a pose.

Business establishments along the street had opened, and traffic was stirring. Fullblood Cherokees, riding gaunt, uncurried ponies, jogged in from the direction of Fairfield Mission, and big freight wagons pulled out on the Tahlequah Road. Turning with an outward show of nonchalance, Smoke walked back to the livery, aware of a growing certainty that his father was somewhere close in the hills.

He found his horse well-fed and groomed to perfection. The old hostler, his sickness alleviated by a fresh turn at the bottle, took pay for the service and kept talking with a loose-tongued verbosity while Smoke saddled and mounted and rode out onto the street.

Hours later, after a cautious and trailless ride across broken country, Smoke halted his horse on a timbered swell above Elk Creek and looked down upon Blackbird Farm.

Immediately in front of him the slope dropped sharply, studded with blackjack trees and lichen-covered flint-rock boulders. In the distance the heavy foliage was like a cushion of velvet, and beyond that velvety expanse of greenness stretched the cleared land, and the buildings of Smoke's old home.

Even from this distance, the double-log house with its spacious hallway was clearly visible, surrounded by barns and stock pens and the emerald-green strip of a huge pear orchard. West of the main farmhouse, looking strangely forlorn, were the substantial log houses which had once sheltered Chief Choate Blackbird's tenants.

The scene made a picture that had been anchored in Smoke's mind for years, and now that its reality was before him, he gave it his whole attention. Then, slowly, as his gaze wandered down-valley, whatever first brief happiness he had felt was washed out.

Once upon a time, as far as his eyes could reach from the crest of this timbered mountain, cultivated fields and green meadows had spread their curves and angles against the creek banks and out into the surrounding hollows. Now that land was cluttered with three-faced camps and the strange-looking houses of settlers.

Movement near one of the settler's houses abruptly drew Smoke's interest. Six fast-riding horsemen had suddenly burst from a copse of timber, racing with a headlong urgency up-valley. To their left, angling toward them, Smoke saw three others. The groups met and halted, their horses milling, then split again, the larger group vanishing on the Stilwell road. The three others galloped on to the barnlot gate of the Blackbird home, and dismounted.

Smoke watched those three with a hard awareness, sensing their excitement and knowing the source of it. Rance LeQuire's body had been found, he knew, and those riders were frantically searching for the killer.

Smoke made no move to ride on until the three men had gone to the main house and vanished inside it; then, turning his horse and sending it at a faster pace, he circled the bluff-girdled rim of the mountain, striking the trail that led down to Blackbird Crossing on Elk Creek.

This had once been a well-beaten horse and foot path from the Cherokee settlements to the old salt works on the Illinois River. Now, it was obviously little-traveled, and Smoke wondered as he rode if the salt works had been abandoned during the war.

He approached the ford cautiously, and dismounted and tied his horse in an alder thicket. Warily, he scouted around on foot, searching for fresh hoofprints. At last, satisfied that no one had preceded him to the crossing, he found a fallen log with a goodly distance of the trail in view, and settled down to wait.

Gradually, here in the seclusion of the forest, with the warm spring wind against his face and the sound of the creek bringing back old memories, Smoke gave full sway to his emotions concerning Belle's marriage to Mays Ashley. Hour by hour his sense of loss was gaining proportions. He knew it was true, and he fought for resignation, but he had carried too close a dream of her through years of war, and he found that resignation would not come.

"Damn him!" Smoke muttered, feeling a primordial instinct for vengeance. "He has taken something from a Blackbird! I'll make him pay!"

Sundown came and went, and the first rippling call of a whippoorwill signaled approaching darkness. At that moment, sensing a presence near him, Smoke stood up.

He saw Fox Chuculate at once, standing on the trail in plain sight; a statuesque and dark shape of a man, his presence irrelevantly shocking.

The Indian approached on moccasined feet, carrying a rifle. He smiled as he stopped in front of Smoke and offered his hand, and Smoke stared at him, amazed at the Indian's transformation. That smile showed the full studding of Chuculate's white buck-teeth, but now there was nothing repulsive about his features. The Indian's eyes held a sharp and yet warm aliveness which only intelligent eyes can hold, and looking into them, Smoke felt a pleasant sense of a new and solid friendship. That feeling was intensified by the firm clasp of Chuculate's hand.

Smoke smiled wryly. "You had me fooled, back there in Gilbey's. I had you tagged for a whisky-sodden breed from the beaujacks."

Fox Chuculate drew himself proudly straight. "I was once a delegate to the Cherokee National Council. Like your father, I

was sent out of the Old Nation when I was young, and educated in Philadelphia."

Smoke Blackbird smiled. "Then you and The Chief are old friends?"

Fox nodded. "Blood brothers, as the fullbloods would say."

"Where is my father now?"

"You will see him soon."

Smoke glanced questioningly along the trail. "Where did you leave your horse?"

"A horse makes sound. We are taking no chances on being followed. Leave yours here."

The Indian turned abruptly, gesturing for Smoke to follow. They crossed the creek on the rocks of the shoal and left the sound of its musical waters behind them, climbing fast through the crowding darkness. Thunder rumbled in the west, and jagged fingers of lightning sent their explosive feelers far off into the Illinois River bottoms. They reached the summit of the first long mountain, where the rising wind whipped angrily through the tall trees, presaging a swift spring storm; then, slowing, Fox led the way down through a dense cedar forest that gave way at last on a jumble of towering boulders. Smoke heard the sound of running water again, and faintly smelled the aroma of burning cedar. The dark mouth of a narrow box canyon loomed ahead, and Smoke saw the dull yellow flare of firelight. Fox turned into the canyon and halted, motioning for Smoke to pass him. Smoke did so, and saw the campfire directly ahead, beside which a lone man was standing.

The man beside the fire was white, with lean, unshaven features, wearing a broadcloth suit that was wrinkled and badly stained. In spite of his incongruous dress here in open country, his bearing was almost stately, and there was an emanating strength and patience about him that moved against Smoke strongly, almost like a tangible thing.

Fox Chuculate said as Smoke halted: "Meet Reverend Henry Rogers. Reverend, this is Smoke Blackbird."

The minister offered his hand, and Smoke took it, concealing his swift surprise. "You're Emily's father?"

"Yes." Rogers' glance was intent, searching. "You've met my daughter? Where?"

"Just west of the Arkansas line. The Boyds had talked her into leaving the country with them, but she got that far and backed out. She's safe at home now." Smoke looked aout him. "Where's Dad?"

"Your father is very ill. He's resting."

Fox Chuculate said firmly, "The chief would want to talk to his son. We must rouse him."

The minister's steady, compassionate eyes held upon Smoke. "Have courage. Your father isn't long for this world." Turning, he led the way around a bulge in the canyon wall.

When Rogers stopped, Smoke's glance reached on beyond him. He saw the high, wide matting of cedar branches under the dogwood tree, and the blanket-covered figure upon them. Smoke went past the minister and knelt.

Choate Blackbird stirred restlessly, pulling his hands free of the blankets, and said with a weak impatience: "Who is it? Who is here?"

Seldom in his life had Smoke Blackbird found himself at a loss for words, but now for a moment he could not speak. He took his father's wrinkled hands, shocked at their thinness; and in the muted light thrown by the distant campfire, at last he saw the smile of recognition take shape on the old chief's face.

"Smoke Rising," Choate Blackbird said. "It has been a long time, my son."

"Yes."

Smoke was barely conscious that Reverend Rogers had turned away and gone back toward the campfire. Sight of his father's dark, wasted face was wrenching at Smoke, filling him with self-condemnation because he had stayed away too long. He said with all the calmness he could muster, "It's good to see you, Dad . . . Good to be back home."

The old chief freed one of his hands and reached out shakily, running it exploringly down Smoke's face. "Your mother's forehead," he said. "And her nose and lips . . . The kind of face people want to look at, for a long, long time."

Smoke remembered his scars, and was suddenly thankful for the dimness. He had witnessed too much of death to mistake its closeness here, and the thought was in him that his father should never have to know about his burns. He said tensely, "I'll bring a good doctor from Stilwell, Dad. You need medicine."

"No doctor will come here. Besides, it is too late to sprinkle salt on the home-fire, after lightning has already done its work."

Smoke's voice was rough with emotion. "I left a fast horse on Elk Creek. I'll have a doctor here before morning, even if I have to bring him at the point of a gun!"

"You speak with the voice of youth," Choate Blackbird said. "You are arrogant, willful. I, too, was once strong and willful, and often ruthless; but age has tempered my thinking." The old chief writhed sideward weakly. "Exposure has fevered my lungs, Smoke. I . . . I must have some promises from you before I die."

Smoke said tightly, "A Blackbird doesn't speak with such resignation!"

"Before morning, you and Cedar will be the only Blackbirds left."

"Fever has dulled your senses, Dad. Don't say that."

"I speak it. I know it!" The old chief's voice strengthened and sharpened. "Have you learned the truth about Cedar?"

Smoke looked into his father's eyes, and saw mirrored there that

gray void of infinity from whence no man should ever return. "If it pains you, Dad, don't speak," he said softly.

"Yes! I must talk . . . quickly! I succumbed to a weakness in my young days, and my enemies have revealed it. It has brought tragedy. Your half-brother is the son of a slave girl who died soon after his birth. I couldn't leave my own flesh and blood under slavery when we moved here to the new Nation, but I lived a lie. I pretended that Cedar was my son from an earlier marriage with an Indian woman. I told people that Cedar had been hurt and was retarded mentally. I was afraid to send him to the Mission Schools. I kept him isolated with friends while we lived at Tahlequah. I let him grow up in the backwoods, ignorant, unschooled!"

"Every man makes mistakes in his life," Smoke said, desperately searching for the right words. "You needn't feel such despondency about Cedar. Hasn't he been better off with you than he would have been under slavery?"

Weakly, Choate Blackbird shook his head. "Under slavery, he would have known his place. Now, he's in love with a part-Cherokee girl, and he's a frustrated, desperate man. If Ashley hadn't printed the scandal here, Cedar might never have known the truth. But by the time crooked politicians had reinstated the LeQuires as Cherokee citizens . . . when they rushed to the farm and took possession . . . gossip was already running wild in this section. I had planned on sending Cedar away to friends in the Choctaw Nation, but I was too late. He had already found out the truth."

"Where is he now?"

"Somewhere close by. He won't see me. He roams the woods. He hates me . . . This is one of the promises I want from you, Smoke: Try to persuade Cedar to get out of this country. The girl he loves knows the truth about his colored blood, and he will become embittered if he stays here. He might even turn to crime. The other promise I want is this: Don't try to fight the LeQuires with guns."

"Don't ask me to make a promise I can't keep!"

"You can keep it! . . . Smoke, all your life you've been a fighter, but a man can't keep living and keep smearing blood on his hands! Besides, the LeQuires have become too strong, surrounded by renegades from the borders. You'll be killed if you try to fight them. Take your problem to General Stand Watie and other Cherokee leaders. Let your lips breathe fire in the Councils!"

Smoke said tonelessly, "Reverend Rogers must have put these things in your head."

"You've talked to him? . . . listened to his reasoning?"

"No. But his daughter preached these same things to me."

Choate Blackbird sighed. "You may think it's weakness, Smoke, but I've become convinced that trust in God is man's greatest strength. Reverend Rogers has been a blessing during these last hours. Fox and some other Cherokees brought him here against

his will, and wouldn't let him tell his daughter where he was going; but once he got here, he stayed and ministered to me willingly. It must have been hard on Emily, not knowing about him, not knowing where he had gone, but Fox was afraid if she knew the LeQuires might force her to tell. The LeQuires might have killed me if I had stayed near the Mission. They knew I was in too close contact with friends in the Indian settlements. We wanted the LeQuires to think I had left the Nation." The old chief seemed to be afflicted with sudden and violent pain. His breath shortened. "Keep Cedar away from the Reverend's daughter, Smoke. Try to let him know the heartbreak he's letting himself in for. He's a sensitive man, easily disturbed, and he doesn't know how to control his emotions, anger or love or anything."

Smoke said unsteadily, "Emily Rogers . . . is she the one?"

"Yes." Choate Blackbird reached under his pillow and handed Smoke a parcel wrapped in doeskin. "Here is the history of the LeQuire family. They're of Creole blood. I used these records once against them. Presented to the right leaders, they'll win the case again."

Smoke sensed the imminent presence of death upon his father as he took the package. He leaned forward, his decision made.

"It's the duty of a Cherokee to trust the wisdom of a good Chief," he said, speaking deliberately in the Cherokee tongue. "It may be that violence has too long been a part of my life. I'll make talk in the Councils against these intruders. I shall fight only when trouble is forced upon me."

"Well spoken," Choate Blackbird murmured. He lay with his face turned upward, staring through the branches of the dogwood tree. It was plain that he had saved his last strength for this talk with Smoke, and now that strength was gone. A branch of the dogwood tree, twisted loose by the growing force of the wind, struck the side of the old chief's face and clung there, shining with white blossoms. Choate Blackbird touched it briefly with his dark, thin fingers, and smiled faintly when it drifted away . . .

Reverend Rogers and Fox Chueulate came close and stood on either side of Smoke as the night wore on, seemingly oblivious to the wind and the driving downpour of rain. The rain had long since extinguished the fire in the canyon, and it was dark; and quietly and stealthily down through that darkness at last crept death . . .

"He asked to be buried here by the dogwood tree," Reverend Rogers said.

Smoke remained kneeling, shielding his father's dead face against the rain. The rain passed, and firelight leaped up suddenly in the canyon. Startled, Fox Chueulate wheeled away. He stepped around the bulge in the canyon wall, leaning attentively forward.

"It's Cedar," Fox said in a strained voice. "Cedar is here."

Chapter Six

SMOKE BLACKBIRD rose, feeling Fox's words brushing against him like a breath of cold swamp wind. He went past the Indian, his heavy cavalry boots squishing on the soggy leafmold, and approached the man who was standing by the new-made fire.

Cedar Blackbird was dressed in buckskins, bareheaded, holding his drenched hat over the flames. His hair was long, shaggy; his appearance reminded Smoke of pictures he had seen of members of bush-tribes. The whole length of Cedar's big body, soaked by the rain, glistened in the firelight. Through the years he had grown and expanded, Smoke saw. Even his face, indigo-hued, broad and thick-lipped, had changed incredibly.

Strange, Smoke thought, that he should feel this weakness as he confronted his half-brother. It was a deep-down weakness, like a sickness of soul that no medicine could ever cure.

Smoke offered his hand and said quietly, "I'm glad to see you, Cedar."

Cedar smiled with a flash of his strong white teeth, but the smile didn't touch his eyes. He ignored Smoke's hand and kept pulling drippings of water from his hat brim. His eyes stayed wide open, shining with their coppery glints. His voice when he spoke held a drawling and avid curiosity.

"Brother Smoke. . . . What happened to your handsome face?"

Smoke dropped his hand, his lips tightening.

Cedar laughed. "Guess you ain't such a devil with the women now."

"Father's dead, Cedar," Smoke said.

"Old Pap?" Cedar shrugged. "Why sure, I knowed that. It's a smell on the wind, that stink of a man dyin'. I smelled it when I started to make this fire." His moccasined feet, huge against the rain-soaked earth, made a shuffling that was like some primitive dance. "I never got book-learnin', like you did, Smoke, but I learned to feel and smell things, all by myself." He laughed, and spat into the fire, and his spittle sizzled. "Pap's smell was bad!"

Outraged, Smoke lunged forward and slapped him. It was a sodden blow, holding the full weight of the heel of Smoke's hand as Cedar leaned in to dodge it.

Catlike, Cedar writhed sideward and shuffled back. Until that moment, Smoke hadn't noticed the knife at Cedar's belt. Cedar had his hand on the hilt of the knife, and under his hand, below the rawhide belt, the long blade glittered wetly.

"Cedar!"

Fox Chuculate's voice was loud, echoing with a strident warning. He appeared beside Smoke, facing Cedar and lifting a restraining hand.

"By God, Smoke," Cedar growled, "you laid your dam' hain' on me!"

"I'll do it again if you don't show respect! I told you our father is dead!"

Cedar's nostrils flared. "Yeah. Yeah, he's dead! Ol' squirmin', lyin', public-lovin' Pap's done dead!"

Fox Chuculate took a lithe step and tried to block Smoke, but Smoke went past him, feeling a blinding sick-fury that only violence would alleviate.

Cedar drew his knife and crouched, his left hand clutching his rawhide belt as if the craze in his mind had forced him to tear at something. His right hand lifted the blade.

Smoke heard the voice of Reverend Rogers, and knew the minister was praying, but it wasn't like a prayer at all. It was more like a desperate statement: "God, neither man deserves to bear the mark of Cain!"

Smoke looked at his half-brother's contorted, hate-filled face, and knew if he went on he would have to kill Cedar. A man could live years, Smoke thought, in a few swift seconds, and all of those years could find their span inside a man's tortured memories. He and Cedar had fought as children and as young men, and it had been this way, with Cedar grabbing at things, stones or clubs or cutting things, anything with which to slay. He had never given up until Smoke had pounded him senseless, and he would not give up now, because he had his blade.

Smoke stepped, and watched Cedar start moving toward him. The whites of Cedar's eyes were shining, and a portion of his red tongue was visible, sticking out between his teeth.

Smoke said warningly, "Don't come any closer, Cedar!"

"Don't ever lay your han' on me!"

"All right. I'm sorry. Later, we'll talk this out."

"Talk, talk, talk!" Cedar said violently. "I ain't wantin' to hear no talkin'! Maybe you can talk slick, like Pap did, but ain't nothin' I want from you 'cept let-alone! Hear me?"

Fox said coldly, "Cedar, put away that knife!"

" 'Cept let-alone," Cedar repeated. "You hear that, Smoke?"

"We have a fight to make together, Cedar . . . a fight to save our farm. It's as much your fight as mine. We can't start fighting each other."

"You fightin' the LeQuires with guns?"

"I'll speak in the Councils first."

Cedar's thick lips writhed. "Pap said he'd make you do that. But Pap's dead now!"

"I gave him my promise, Cedar. I'll keep it."

"It's my farm, too!" Cedar said harshly. "I'll be cuttin' some throats!"

Fox Chuculate said grimly, "You'll hang from a stable beam, or be shot from ambush! You won't make a move against the LeQuires, until Smoke gives the order!"

"You takin' his side now?"

"Yes! And every displaced Cherokee I know will do the same! It'll take more than a sharp blade to beat the LeQuires and Ashley! Put up that knife, and show some respect while we bury your father. You and Smoke go back to the cabin where you and your father last lived. You can scout around from there . . . watch . . . listen, keep track of the LeQuires while Smoke makes his talks in the Councils!"

"I'll make my home in the woods!"

Fox looked at Cedar with a cold impatience, then motioned to Smoke and turned away up-canyon. Smoke followed, and Reverend Rogers walked quietly by his side.

There were no means at hand for a coffin; so, while the storm blew itself out across the mountains, they pried up the boulders near the small dogwood tree, and scraped out a grave with sharp sticks and pieces of jagged stone. They wrapped the old chief's body tenderly in the blankets, and Reverend Rogers took a moment to remind Smoke and Fox of the destiny of man's soul. Then they consigned the body to the earth and covered it, and stood with bared heads while the minister said a last prayer. After that, the minister looked along the walls of the canyon reflectively and said with deep feeling: "He was a man for whom crossings of creeks and fordings of rivers have been named. Now I christen this place Blackbird Canyon."

When they left the grave and went back to the fire, they saw that Cedar Blackbird was gone.

"He comes and he goes," Fox said resignedly, resting a hand on Smoke's shoulder. "You can't let him stand in your way, or become a burden to you."

"Do you think there's any chance of talking him into leaving the country?"

Fox glanced uneasily at Rogers. "What do you think, Reverend?"

Rogers shook his head. "Not now."

Their meaning was clear to Smoke. He said distinctly, "I'll see that he doesn't bother her, Reverend."

The minister looked down into the fire. "He wouldn't harm Emily. I've watched them together. Cedar loves her. He wouldn't harm a hair on her head."

Fox picked up his rifle, preparing to go, and said to Reverend Rogers, "I had a man follow me as far as Blackbird Crossing. He left a horse there for you." The Indian turned to Smoke. "There are many Cherokees in the woods who will be ready to side you, if the need ever comes. But I know the last wishes of the old chief, and there will be no use asking for assistance until all your other measures fail. Do you fully understand me?"

"Yes. But how will I contact you?"

Fox smiled, and said in guttural, broken English, "Got pork side, gravy, stew. Got good woman. Good cook."

Smoke nodded, and watched the Indian turn away and stride down canyon, vanishing like a shadow in the night.

Smoke and Reverend Rogers found their horses tied close together in the alders on the bank of Elk Creek. They mounted and rode without talking, thinking their own thoughts. When they came out of the unsettled forest, the storm clouds had all vanished; the sky was clear and the moon was up. They struck the main road, traveling eastward, climbing the high hills.

"Here," the minister said at last, and reined in.

Smoke saw the cabin in the small clearing, a forlorn shape with the banks of the mountains behind it. A sagging stake-and-rider fence enclosed it, and beyond it was a ramshackle log barn. Smoke looked at the place, torn by sadness, thinking how strange it was that a once powerful chief of the Cherokees should have been forced in his last days to this. Bitterness against the LeQuires caught him, reaching to the peak of anger.

With an invitation to visit the Mission, and a quiet word of farewell, Reverend Rogers left him. Smoke lingered on the road a moment, looking at the Cabin while the anger gradually seeped out of him. When the anger was gone, it was replaced by a feeling of insecurity, strangely like those dark premonitions of death he had felt now and then during the war. He supposed the feeling was partly caused by the sight of the deserted cabin. He tried to shrug it aside as he rode on to the barnlot gate and dismounted.

Moonlight flooded the barnyard, illuminating an old feeding trough and the deep wallows made by horses and mules. Smoke threw back the gate of the lot and led his horse inside and suddenly paused.

A sound had come to him, and he instantly recognized it for what it was. A horse inside the barn had snorted and made a restless turn, a stirrup of its saddle striking against the stable logs.

A saddled horse in a stable. . . . Someone waiting! Smoke Blackbird froze.

He was standing that way when the rear door of the cabin behind him scraped open. He wheeled, drawing his gun, and saw the woman in the cabin doorway at the same time he heard her voice.

"Smoke?"

Four years had not dulled his memory of Belle's voice, and it came into his hearing now with a warm aliveness. He holstered his gun. The horse in the stable took another restless turn, nickering softly. Belle said again, urgently:

"Is that you, Smoke?"

Smoke closed the barnlot gate and went toward her. She stood half out of the cabin doorway, in the full slant of the westering moon; a slender shape in a fashionable riding habit, bareheaded, her red-gold hair falling about her shoulders. She closed the door of the cabin and stepped into the yard as he neared her, and Smoke saw the ivory-white gleam of her hands, reaching eagerly

out to him. Close sight of her sent its shock through him, but he paused, remembering that she was now Mays Ashley's wife.

"Smoke!" she whispered. "I'm so glad to see you!"

He took one of her hands, and he was acutely conscious of the tight, warm pressure of her fingers, but there was a thought in him and he voiced it almost sharply, "What are you doing here, Belle? Are you alone?"

"Yes. I've been waiting for hours, hoping you'd come here. Smoke, I'm afraid my husband can't handle the LeQuires any longer! I came to warn you. They want to hunt you down and kill you, because they think you killed Rance!"

"I might not be so easy to kill."

"Don't say that!" She released her tight grip on his hand and stepped back to look at him fully. "Why didn't you take the money Mays offered? It would have bought you a safe place to stay."

Smoke said with a low scorn, "So your husband told you he tried to pay me to get out of the country?"

"Out of the country?" Belle stared at him. "That wasn't in our bargain, Smoke! I don't want you to leave here . . . at least not yet! . . . When Murtch and those riders told us you were back, I MADE my husband promise to protect you from the LeQuires . . . to give you enough money to live comfortably. But now, since Rance's body has been found . . ."

Smoke cut in bluntly, unwilling for the first time in his life to trust her: "Ashley said he was paying me to leave the country, so the LeQuires wouldn't get a chance at me. He said he didn't want any more violence from the LeQuires. He said violence would bring soldiers here, and that soldiers would ruin his plans."

She said bitterly, "That's like Mays, always dodging, unwilling to admit the truth! Smoke, you've got to understand that the U. S. Government won't help in your case. No Army will come here. The intruder problem is being left up to the Cherokee Government . . . and Mays doesn't care if the LeQuires kill you! He hates you . . . more than ever after what you did to him in his office. He would kill you himself if he thought I wouldn't leave him; if he had the nerve."

"Tell him that's mutual," Smoke said. "Only I have the nerve. I might have killed him when I had my hands on him, if I hadn't remembered you're his wife."

She stood very still, looking at him. "Never let that stop you, Smoke."

Smoke stared at her, absorbing the brazen implication in her words, and suddenly knew a sharp suspicion. "How did you get the chance to come here?"

"I MADE my chance, Smoke!" She laughed softly. "Oh, I've learned to connive since you've been gone! I've had to! May's once promised me a certain fine house in Stilwell as soon as we were married, but the owners live in Tahlequah, and he hadn't been able to close the deal. I told him this morning I must have

that house this week . . . or else! So he left for Tahlequah, and I took the chance and came here. Even at that, though, Smoke, we don't have long . . ."

Her voice trailed off and she moved against him, touching his arms. A cool gust of wind came up the valley, droning around the eaves of the cabin and rustling through her red-gold hair. She said with a soft insistence, "Smoke, aren't you going to say you're glad to see me? Aren't you glad to see me at all?"

The wind carried the smells of springtime, and all the small sounds of the deepening night. "Yes," Smoke said. "Yes, I'm glad to see you, Belle."

"Kiss me!"

He held her back and looked at her, and his hunger for her was tinged with a strange cold savagery born of thoughts of Mays Ashley. His body stilled. He said roughly, "What are you trying to do, Belle? You're married."

"Yes." She pushed herself against him, her face lifted so close he could feel her breath. "Do you know why I married, Smoke? Do you realize what it was like during the War, with half the people here in the Nation starving to death . . . with men like my father breaking, worrying until they were no longer able to struggle for existence? After my father died, I almost had to scavenge to live! I married for money, Smoke . . . but I'm wife in name only, so far!"

"You knew I was coming home, Belle. Why didn't you wait?"

"I knew you didn't have anything to come back to! Your farm had been taken over by the LeQuires and the man I married!" She laughed, and the sound held a breathless challenge. "I married for money . . . but Mays Ashley hasn't touched me yet!"

Hatred for a man could make another man's thoughts turn bitter, Smoke Blackbird thought, even when he held the woman he loved in his arms. Smoke held Belle, and kissed her, and felt the soft, full measure of her body against him; but all the while, that hatred for Ashley raged inside him and Belle's words kept echoing in his mind: "Mays Ashley hasn't touched me yet!"

All of Smoke's life, he had been a fighter, and his Indian blood had imbued him with an instinctive urge for vengeance. Always, he had been quick to hate and quick to kill those who connived to destroy any member of the Blackbird family. Now Mays Ashley had destroyed a dream in Smoke Blackbird that had become almost as precious as life. Mays Ashley had circulated printed words of an old scandal that had destroyed Chief Choate Blackbird. That scandal had made Cedar an outcast.

At this moment, holding Belle in his arms, whatever tenderness Smoke felt for her was overshadowed by his hatred of Ashley. Mays Ashley might have Belle all the rest of his life, Smoke thought, but not this first time. Not now, tonight . . .

Smoke stooped, throwing his arm around the bend of her knees

and lifting her tightly against him . . . I can take something from Ashley, he thought. This would be vengeance, sweet . . .

Smoke touched the door of the cabin with the tip of a cavalry boot and pressed it inward. He carried Belle across the threshold, feeling her warm breath quickening against his burned face, and saw moonlight through a dingy west window slanting down across a makeshift bed.

Chapter Seven

MUCH LATER, he stood at the barnlot gate and listened to the sound of Belle's horse fading in the distance, and he thought how strange it was that a woman could seem so much less vulnerable than a man to the ravages of conscience.

"I'll be back, Smoke," Belle had whispered, and there had been nothing in her voice except happiness and a breathless anticipation. She had leaned from her saddle and lightly touched his face. "Mays told me no woman would want to look at you twice, let alone touch you . . . but he wasn't speaking for me! I'll be back soon! Goodnight."

Strange, Smoke thought, that during all these years he had misjudged her. Maybe it was always that way, he thought. Maybe a man never really knew any woman. He hadn't known that Belle could sin, and then, unburdened by contriteness or self-condemnation, make plans to sin again.

Smoke unsaddled his horse and turned it out in the small pasture behind the barn, then stood a long time in the open, breathing deeply of the night air and listening to the hill-country sounds around him. The moon was bright, and the air smelled clean and cooling, but neither of these things brought peace. It was the price an imaginative and educated man always paid, Smoke thought, when he had acted rashly. Too often in Smoke Blackbird's past it had been this way, a troubled conscience moving in the wake of abandoned passion or vengeance; yet always, invariably, whenever Smoke was crossed his mind was vengeance-bent.

Suddenly he thought of Emily Rogers, and knew at once how great her insight had been when she had called him a desperate man. Emily . . . was she the kind who could sin, and perhaps ask God quickly for forgiveness, and then go her way untroubled? Somehow, Smoke thought not.

At last, reluctantly, he went back inside the cabin, dreading to feel Belle's recent presence still clinging to the room. Strangely, however, even while he pounded the straw ticking and straightened the ragged quilt on the bed, he was conscious of a faint amazement that he had possessed her here. He had the feeling that the

experience was like a troublesome episode that would haunt him for a while and then become lost to mind in the heat of new resolution. He knew he would never let it happen again. Perhaps that resolution was born of the memory of his dreams of her, which had soared to such great heights during his years away at war. Here in this isolated cabin tonight, those dreams had struck rock-bottom in a vengeance move that had been rotten, cheap.

"I wasn't doing anything to Ashley," Smoke thought. "He'd have to know the truth to be hurt by a thing like that, and Belle wouldn't dare to let him know. He'd cut her off without money. Money is the thing she wants."

The certain knowledge of that was strong in Smoke as he searched the cabin thoroughly in the light of a candle he found on the mantlepiece. There was no food in the house, and he wondered about breakfast, then consoled himself with the thought that the woods were alive with squirrels. Finally, after an hour spent studying the papers on the history of the LeQuire family, he pulled off his boots and retired.

A gentle knocking on the front door penetrated through his slumbers. He sat up on the edge of the bed, instantly alert. The interior of the room, lighted only by the dirty west window, was dim and gloomy. He had no idea how long he had slept.

"Mister Blackbird." It was the voice of Emily Rogers. "Are you up?"

"Just a minute." Smoke hurriedly pulled on his boots, wondering why she had come here. When he opened the door he saw her standing by a gray horse, holding a cloth-covered tray which she smilingly offered toward him.

"Father said you might not be fixed so well for breakfast," she said. "I brought this."

"Thanks, Miss Rogers." Smoke took the tray and stood looking at her. "How is your father this morning?"

"He's worn out," she answered. "Otherwise, he would have brought your breakfast himself . . . Want me to come in and arrange the food on the table?"

"You've gone to trouble enough," Smoke said quickly. He knew quite suddenly that he did not want Emily Rogers inside the dingy cabin. "It's good of you to bring this. I'll ride to Stilwell this morning and get some supplies."

"Won't that be . . . dangerous?"

He smiled. "I can't hibernate, Miss Rogers." He turned, placed the tray of food on a shelf just inside the doorway, and stepped outside. He was astonished that he had slept so long. The sun was high over the treetops and the sky looked clear and cool. The forest around the clearing shone darkly emerald, clean-washed by last night's rain.

"Smoke, I'm sorry about your father," Emily said.

"I know you are." He looked around the clearing and shook off with an effort a rush of sadness and despondency. A mockingbird,

winging up and then settling again on the stake-and-rider fence, sent out its incessant chanting. His horse, standing at the barnlot gate, lifted its head with ears pointed forward, nickering softly.

Emily asked uneasily, "Do you have money to buy groceries?"

"Yes."

She ran a hand through her dusky hair, and all at once she seemed ill-at-ease in his presence. "Father told me to ask you that," she said. "You see, most of the returning soldiers we've met have been totally without money."

Smoke Blackbird smiled. "So many soldiers never seem to have any luck at poker. It's too bad."

Emily's answering smile held a touch of sadness. "Smoke, are there any vices you don't have?"

"Maybe. A few." He waited a moment, watching her smile fade and her face go still. "Army men seldom think of poker as a vice," he said. "It's more like a disease."

"Is it a disease with you, Smoke?"

"No."

"Then I don't understand you. If it isn't a disease with you, why is it a disease at all?"

Smoke smiled again. "That's hard to answer. It's . . . well, it's like the way some men can drink moderately and others can't. You know what I mean."

"No," she said. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean. To me, gambling and drinking are moral wrongs, nothing else. I was never taught that they were diseases."

"You were brought up strictly, weren't you, Emily?" Smoke said.

She looked at him steadily. "I suppose I was. Don't you think that's a good thing?"

He looked at her and remembered Belle Ashley, and suddenly there was a dry, stale taste in his mouth, and a vague resentment against this full-bodied part-Cherokee girl who stood before him with such cleanness and goodness emanating from her. Emily's goodness condemned him— Or was it the bleak voice of his own conscience?

"Yes, I think strict raising is a good thing," Smoke said at last. Then he added, "I admit that with reservations."

"Why with reservations?" Emily asked.

He smiled. "Maybe someday I'll tell you. Now, I'm ready to sample the breakfast you brought. And thanks again . . . and don't be surprised if I bring you some kind of a frippet from town."

She laughed. "You're a strange man, Smoke Rising Blackbird! But I like you, and so does Father . . . But I don't crave frills or frippets!" She laughed again and the sound smoothed out the last vestiges of his faint resentment. She had that way with her, and it warmed him; and she had a way of changing from laughter to seriousness, and he found that he liked that also. She changed to seriousness now. "We need some things from town, Smoke. Do you mind if I ride with you?"

He hesitated, thinking of the possibility of trouble, then said quietly, "I guess not."

She said eagerly, "We could even take our hack. I'll ride back to the Mission and have it ready while you eat and shave. We can haul back whatever we need. Is that all right?"

He nodded. "I suppose so, if your father won't object."

She was smiling as she turned to her horse and mounted. Once settled in the woman's side-saddle, she said happily, "Father won't object at all." She rode away with conscious decorum, her sandaled feet bobbing below her skirt. Smoke watched her until a bend in the road hid her from his sight.

The tray she had brought contained biscuits and butter, blackberry jam and a thin slice of pork. Smoke ate slowly, savoring the food and thinking of Emily, remembering the way she had looked with the bright sun behind her, and understanding how Cedar had fallen in love with her. Perhaps she had brought food to Cedar and his father, here to this log cabin. Perhaps her personality had taken hold of Cedar, as it had taken hold of Smoke. That thought sent a sharp stab of unease through Smoke, and brought back the old despondency and frustration about Cedar. A sorrow too deep for tears grew in Smoke Blackbird, intensified by the memory of those coppery glints in Cedar's eyes, and the way Cedar's huge feet had shuffled on the soggy earth in the canyon.

That despondency was still upon Smoke an hour later when he reined in at the gate of the Mission yard and dismounted.

Emily and Reverend Rogers had the hack ready in front of the big log barn. Emily was on the seat waiting, her face composed under a yellow-plumed straw hat. The minister greeted Smoke warmly as he took Smoke's horse, then said calmly:

"I don't want to excite you, Smoke, but two of LeQuire's riders were here while Emily was gone. They wanted to know if you're living at your father's old cabin."

"That was some question to ask you," Smoke said. "Why didn't they go to the cabin and see?"

Rogers smiled. "I think they were leary . . . just the two of them. If they ever brace you at your home, you can look for six or eight. You may not like this, but I told them you didn't intend to start trouble. I told them that trouble had to be stopped here, and I made it sound like a warning. It was good to see that the Church still holds some power, even over the souls of potential killers. They didn't ignore my words."

"Did you tell them my Dad is dead?"

"They didn't ask me."

Smoke nodded. "I hope they never do." He looked at Emily. "Are you sure you don't mind, Reverend?"

"She'll keep you out of trouble, Smoke," the minister answered. "Even the LeQuires won't start gunplay against you as long as you're with my daughter."

Smoke nodded again and climbed to the seat of the hack be-

side Emily, but he did not have the same conviction the minister had. Smoke was remembering that Rance LeQuire had stalked Emily through a dark woodland, and the same blood that had coursed in Rance's veins was still coursing in Fain and Grat.

"You look grim, Smoke," Emily said as he lifted the lines and turned the hack out onto the Stilwell road. "Is it necessary to pull such a long face, and this such a beautiful morning?"

He gave her a sideward glance. "I was never much of a hand at pretending, Emily. I've heard tales of men facing guns with smiles on their faces; of men laughing with hang-ropes about their necks. I am not that kind of man."

He heard her slow-drawn breath and turned to look at her squarely. She asked uneasily: "Why do you have to speak of such terrible, depressing things, Smoke? Can't you look at this day and feel that God is in Heaven? That things can be made right in this world?"

"They can be, allright, but will they?"

"Don't be so cynical, Smoke." She was silent a moment. "Smoke, I haven't told anyone about Rance LeQuire, not even my father. Do you think that's wrong?"

"You should know more than I do about things like that. If you feel it's wrong, don't hesitate to speak."

"I'm uncertain," she said. "I want to protect you."

He said with a touch of coldness, "The LeQuires already think I killed Rance."

Her face lifted. "How do you know that?"

Smoke remembered Belle, and he faced ahead and said evasively, "I saw riders cutting up and down Elk Creek Valley yesterday. I had a feeling they were looking for me."

Emily's prolonged silence after that made Smoke turn to look at her. She had turned slightly sideward, facing away from him, but he could sense a growing tension upon her. She said at last, "Smoke, I think I ought to tell you I saw Belle Ashley pass the Mission late yesterday. She was off the road, riding very slowly, but I was hunting poke greens in the woods, and I saw her. . . . Did you find her at the cabin last night?"

Smoke's face was inscrutable. He drove without answering.

She said quickly, "I'm sorry I asked that, Smoke. I'm sorry . . . about you and Belle."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I can understand what her marriage to Mays Ashley must have done to you. I . . . wanted to cry, there on the road, when you told me you had returned to marry her. I wanted to tell you then, but I just couldn't. All I could do was hurry away."

Smoke sensed her compassion again, and again he didn't want it. He said curtly, "I guess you've been disappointed in love, then, if you can understand a thing like that."

"No. No, I've never been in love that way, but I know what disappointment can do to a man. I saw what it did to Cedar."

Smoke looked at her narrowly. "Has Cedar been bothering you?"

"He asked me to marry him once," she answered. "When I told him I didn't love him that way . . . that I could never marry him . . . he went to pieces and . . . and cried like a baby, and him a grown man."

"Cedar . . . cried?" Smoke said unsteadily.

"Yes."

"I guess you know all about Cedar, don't you, Emily?"

"Yes. I think that was part of the thing I felt for you, Smoke, when I first met you. I had a dread for you, because of the thing I knew you'd have to face here."

Smoke fought at the despondency upon him, but could not find release from it. He had suspected the truth about his half-brother for years, but had never dared talk it. Now, however, driving along the sunny road with Emily beside him, he felt an overpowering urge to talk.

"I'm wondering what to do about Cedar, Emily. I'm wondering if I can manage to send him away. Dad thought of the Choctaw Nation, where many colored people were absorbed into that tribe. I'm thinking of someplace in the North, where Cedar can work and build a new life for himself."

"I've thought about that, too."

"I know now why Dad would never keep slaves on the farm. He let tenants handle the livestock and the land. It's a wonder he didn't object when I joined the Confederacy. I'll wonder about that, I suppose, all my life."

"Your father sought repentance in his last hours," Emily said. "That was a good thing, Smoke."

They rode the hack on without talking after that, but the problem was still in Smoke's mind, eating at him like a blight when they reached town and turned into Main Street. The street was crowded with buggies and wagons and saddled horses, and people thronged the sidewalks. Smoke found a vacant place and drove the hack into it and halted.

He wound the checklines around the whipstock and stepped to the trampled street. "I'll meet you back here in half an hour, Emily. As soon as I buy groceries and pick up a copy of the Cherokee Advocate, I'll be ready to go."

She stayed on the seat for a moment, looking at him intently. "Your father did persuade you to try the Councils, didn't he, Smoke?"

He nodded and smiled briefly. "Maybe it was you and Dad both. That's the reason I want a copy of the Advocate. I need to find out how I can reach Stand Watie."

He offered his hand to her and she came down lightly beside him. A red-wheeled surrey behind a sleek span of horses neared them, headed out of town. Smoke's glance, always curious, touched the vehicle and remained upon it. He saw Belle and Mays Ashley on the seat.

Ashley's attention was held by the thickening traffic. He failed to see Smoke. He passed with his mustached face in profile, a black cigar clamped between his teeth, his gloved hands gripping the checklines.

Belle's red-gold hair caught flecks of amber from the morning sunlight, and the sun drew flashes of changing color from new ruby pendants in her ears. She was richly groomed and aware of it, and very conscious of the passing crowd. Her glance moved sideward and picked up Smoke and Emily, and Smoke saw her jerk a hand instinctively to her throat. She pulled her hand down quickly and got control of herself, but her glance kept holding upon Emily Rogers; and there was a rapier-sharpness in her eyes unlike any look Smoke had ever seen in them. When her glance left Emily it struck Smoke for an instant accusingly. Then Belle faced ahead and the surrey vanished out of town.

Chapter Eight

SMOKE LOOKED at Emily Rogers and saw that her face had not changed expression, but it was plain to him that she had been aware of Belle's searching, jealous glance. That awareness was revealed in the strange darkening of Emily's eyes, like the mysterious changing of deep pools on Elk Creek at noontime when cloud-shadows shielded the sun.

She looked up at Smoke without speaking, and that darkness in her eyes intensified, filling them with a power she was totally unaware of. Smoke was man enough and sensitive enough to recognize the source that had stirred that power to life, and the knowledge warmed him. In spite of her strict beliefs, she was all woman, imbued with pride and tenderness and compassion, yet capable in her extremities of reverting to a primitive urge that would make her fight.

With an impulsiveness that was new to him, Smoke touched her arm. "On second thought, Emily," he said, "I don't see why we can't do our trading together."

"Of course. We're neighbors, aren't we?" She smiled. "Besides, I had no intention of letting you out of my sight here. You should have known that, Smoke."

He took her arm and they went up onto the sidewalk. They passed the hardware store and the bootery, and Mays Ashley's print shop and Gilbey's Restaurant. They crossed the intersection, their bodies touching in the press of the crowd.

Then, abruptly, with a suddenness that planted his bootheels deep in the dirt of the street, Smoke stopped.

Emily went slightly past him, her impetus breaking his clasp on her arm. Puzzled, she turned to look at him while the crowd slowed

and broke apart around them, but Smoke had instantly shut her out of his sight. He was giving his whole attention to the two men confronting him.

Those two were Arch and Chain.

They had halted directly in front of Smoke, both seeing him and recognizing him on the same instant. It was obvious to Smoke that they had stepped into this unknowingly, as Smoke had. He watched the chill leap up to their eyes and spill down across their faces, fixing their lips.

Arch was the slow-minded one. It took him longer to regain composure. Chain's face was that of a weasel, thin and cruel and ferreting, barely caught with a fleeting shock.

Their stopping had slowed the crowd behind them, and people were staring, perhaps feeling the keen edge of the tension that thrust between Smoke and them. A man said in a sibilant whisper, "Trouble!" and the word struck through the crowd and made it disintegrate.

"Smoke!" Emily said in a choked voice, and wheeled back and caught his arm.

Smoke shoved away with unwonted savagery and said harshly. "Don't ever take hold of my gun-arm!" Shocked at what she saw on his powder-burned visage, she released him and backed away.

"So you've still got a killing urge on you, have you, Blackbird?" Arch's voice was like a cutting-tool chiseling flint.

Smoke answered distinctly, "If anybody crosses me, yes!"

Arch and Chain moved backward, lifting their boots high and gaining the sidewalk slightly above Smoke.

"Had Rance LeQuire crossed you when you killed him?" Arch asked.

With an insight that always came to him in moments like these, Smoke knew that to keep his promise to his dying father, he would have to try to parry with words.

"You're jumping at conclusions, Arch."

Arch said flatly, "It's a strange thing to me that Rance got killed, on the very day you got back!"

"Was everyone in this country Rance's friend?"

Arch said sneeringly, "You claiming you didn't kill him? You're pretending? . . ."

"I'm not pretending anything in front of you, Arch!" Smoke cut in sharply. "I'm not that scared of you . . . either of you!"

"You killed Rance!"

"You prove that, Arch!"

"We don't aim to try to prove anything, Blackbird! Ashley ain't here to tell me and Chain what to do and what not to do! We're taking you right where you stand!"

People had darted through the doorways of stores, and out into the center of the street away from the line of gunfire. Traffic was blocked, and the town close at hand was silent; but far up the street

where news of the trouble hadn't reached, people kept coming. This was the picture behind Arch and Chain, and Smoke knew that behind himself the scene was repeated. Innocent people . . . Cherokee men and women and children, walking on a sunny street where the next instant stray lead might take their lives. It would not do. He had to take Arch bare-handed, Smoke thought, and hope that Chain wouldn't shoot him in the back while they fought.

Smoke tensed and waited, watching Arch, and through the momentary stillness he heard the sound of shuffling, erratic footsteps. The footsteps came up behind Smoke; he took a step forward, feeling trapped and getting set to leap and grab Arch's gun hand on the instant Arch started to make his draw.

Arch waited also, his stance like that of one leaning over the brink of a deep chasm, wanting to leap but dreading that long, long fall. He would jump, however. The determination was growing in his rock-hard glance. His right hand was hovering above his gun.

The shuffling footsteps seemed hurried, drawing alongside Smoke and passing him. A man lurched drunkenly between Smoke and Arch and Chain. It was Fox Chuculate, his dark face contorted under his floppy hat, his buck-teeth shining, his breath like the hiss of a maddened snake. With feigned drunkenness he tottered directly in front of Chain, and then he lurched violently against Chain, his hands trying to flail the gunman aside. Chain stepped back, cursing, then came forward.

"Dam' bastard w'ite man!" Fox said thickly. "Hav' good drink!" Almost with magical deftness, Fox had jerked a heavy quart bottle from the loose front of his shirt. It was full, and the amber liquid shone like diluted blood in the sunlight as the bottle rose and fell, striking against Chain's face.

Chain was out of the picture. Smoke leaped at Arch.

Arch had his pistol free when Smoke's hands caught it. The gun discharged, burning Smoke's fingers and slamming lead down between his boots. Smoke heaved, slinging Arch sideward and breaking his grip on the gun. Arch went against the brick wall of a mercantile store, weaponless. Smoke tossed the pistol away.

With a roll of his heavy shoulders, Arch got straight. Smoke saw him take one swift look at Chain, who was sprawled out laxly on the sidewalk. Then Arch turned to look at Fox, who was lolling with feigned drunkenness against an awning post. The full bottle dangled from Fox's hand.

"You damn drunken 'breed!" Arch snarled. "You've played hell!"

Fox looked down at the dirty sidewalk with a drunk man's vacant stare. Smoke said tauntingly, "You've lost all your backing, Arch!" and went against the gunman, striking him left-handed alongside the face.

It was a deceptive kind of blow, seemingly short and ineffectual, but Smoke's tough sinews put a snap to it, and it almost put Arch down. Smoke's following right to Arch's mid-section got the

feel of him; Arch was solid, strong. He came at Smoke in a rush, his fists packing the jolting power of a kicking horse. Arch would be hard to whip; but he hadn't reached Smoke's face. Smoke circled, chopping Arch's face to pieces with lefts and rights.

Arch stopped and took a swipe at the blood that was blurring his vision. Smoke waited for him, thinking he would charge again. Instead, Arch's knees buckled under him and he went down in a crawling posture, his hands splayed on the sidewalk. His head kept wobbling from side to side.

"Smoke!" Emily said pleadingly, "Please don't hit him again!"

"Stay back!" Smoke said.

Arch's strange collapse was an old, old ruse, Smoke knew, and he waited, wanting this crowd to witness the thing and know just what kind of man Ashley and the LeQuires had hired. Arch kept shaking his head, and blood dripped out of his face and turned rusty-hued in the grit on the sidewalk. Then, with a catapulting drive of his sturdy legs, Arch jumped toward the sprawled-out form of Chain.

Chain's gun was still in the scabbard and Arch was pulling at it. Smoke hurled himself forward and down. He caught Arch's wrist with his left hand and drove his right fist into Arch's face. Arch rolled with the blow and dragged Chain's pistol clear of the holster in spite of Smoke's iron-clamped hold on his wrist. Smoke twisted around and took both hands to the wrist, and planted his bent knee across Arch's throat. They were near the edge of the sidewalk, and Arch's arm kept straightening and he wouldn't turn loose of the gun.

Smoke threw his weight violently downward as Arch's hand with the pistol went out past the edge of the sidewalk. Arch's arm broke with an audible snap, halfway between wrist and elbow, and the gun dropped to the street.

Smoke stood up, watching Arch's face go ashen-hued and hearing the agonized groan that escaped him. All the fight was out of Arch, and would be out of him for a long time. Smoke looked at Chain, and saw that the weasel-faced gunman was reviving. Fox Chuculate was gone.

So was Emily. Smoke searched the crowd for her, and turned and went to the hack, but she had vanished. She couldn't stand the sight of that fight, Smoke thought, and the thought quelled his faint unease.

Two men were assisting Arch and Chain through the doorway of a small clapboard building across the street. Above the door of the building, Smoke saw a doctor's sign. He went through the dispersing crowd past Gilbey's Restaurant again, and finally saw Emily through the plate-glass front of a General Merchandise store. She was making purchases from a balding clerk. Smoke paused, debating whether or not to join her. He chose to wait. He went on to the next corner and entered the drug store, remembering his

need for a copy of the Cherokee Advocate. The drug store was also a variety shop.

He purchased the paper and folded it neatly. He put it into one of his hip pockets, taking his time and looking around the store. A half-formed thought kept tugging at his mind, and finally flicked into focus . . . A gift for Emily. No frippet, no trinket, and he had the feeling that she would not wear anything that glittered like those sparkling ruby pendants Belle had worn.

The clerk was waiting behind the counter, watching Smoke. "Some gift for a woman," Smoke said, frowning. "You have any idea?"

"Indian?"

"Part."

"We have some beaded shawls in back, a few red ribbons . . ."

"She isn't that much Indian," Smoke said.

The clerk pursed his lips. "A handbag, maybe? Distinctive, fine leather, several compartments for the things a woman might carry?"

"That's it," Smoke said.

A few minutes later, with the paper-wrapped handbag tucked under his left arm, Smoke reached the street and saw Emily placing parcels of groceries between the seats of the hack. He paused to watch her, thinking of the gift he had bought and wondering if he had purchased the right thing. Maybe a ribbon or a beaded shawl would have been better; something to heighten the color of her quiet face; something she could touch with her deft hands and know tenderness and beauty in the feel of silk . . .

"She's pretty enough," Smoke thought, shrugging as he turned into the store where she had bought her supplies. "And she's practical. I know that."

He bought his own supplies hurriedly and carried them out in a burlap sack. Emily was waiting on the seat of the hack, looking calmly around at the town. Smoke placed his groceries beside hers and climbed up and unwound the checklines. He sensed a reserve in Emily's manner as he backed the hack and turned it and drove rapidly along the street.

Houses of the town fell behind them, and the road swerved in pleasant undulations across the green hills. It was warm, with the sun pressing heat into the flint rocks and the sky like a cobalt cone.

"Open this package, Emily," Smoke said, and laid the handbag into her lap.

"What is it?"

"Open it up and see."

He spoke with feigned nonchalance, hiding with an effort the tension that was mounting in him. He kept his glance on the road, listening as her hands broke the twine and unwrapped the package. He heard her breath, quickly indrawn, and his unease vanished like a small drift of snow in the sun.

"Smoke!" she said unbelievingly. "Is this for me?"

"How do you like it, Emily?"

"Why . . . it's so . . . so expensive!"

"Pretty, though, don't you think?"

"It's beautiful!" She held it up between them, and when Smoke turned he saw that her eyes were fastened upon his face. "You shouldn't have done this, Smoke. You can't afford it. Besides, a man doesn't buy a gift like this for a girl, unless . . ."

"Unless what, Emily?"

She let the handbag fall into her lap and faced ahead quickly. She said at last in a small voice, "There can't ever be anything between us, Smoke, if that's what you're thinking. I . . . I was too friendly with Cedar. I don't want anything like that to happen again."

"Why can't there ever be anything between us?"

"Because I don't understand you, Smoke. I thought I did, but I don't. I said this morning that you're a strange man, but I didn't know until today just how strange. That fight . . . the way you faced those men . . . ready to kill them . . . the way you looked . . . the way you flared at me! I don't know you, Smoke. I . . . I could never really know a man like you."

"You didn't expect me to welch, did you?" Smoke said tensely. "To crawl to men like Arch and Chain? To let them get the drop on me, and drag me off to face the LeQuires and maybe be murdered?"

She said passionately, "I don't know what I expected of you! I never want to think about what to expect of you! I only know I can't stand to see such . . . such terrible hatred and determination to kill in the face of a man! . . . It wouldn't be this way if you weren't so inclined to violence! Why can't you send a message to your enemies, and tell them you want to live in peace? Why do you have to walk with such arrogance, and be so quick to take offense? . . . The way you broke that man's arm, coldly, deliberately . . . that was awful, Smoke!"

"He had a gun in his hand, fixing to kill me."

She went on chokingly as if she hadn't heard him: "I keep remembering you rode with Quantrill. I . . . I can't stand the sound of the name! . . . He never raided here, but the news of his depredations reached us . . . I used to lie in bed at night when I was a child, after I'd seen a brush fire somewhere far away on the hills, and I would shake with fear, afraid before morning the fire would sweep across that distance and consume us! . . . It was that way when I heard about the raids of Quantrill. They were far off, but always at night I feared they'd come here, to burn and pillage and kill!"

"I didn't stay long with Quantrill, Emily. It was by mere accident that I ever even rode with him."

She was quiet a moment, and then she turned on the seat to face him, and her eyes showed a willingness to hear him talk.

"I was discharged at Nashville," Smoke went on. "Some of my

old buddies were with me, and we rode a train back west as far as central Missouri. We were stopped at a town I've forgotten the name of, and a man offered to sell me this horse and saddle, cheap. I wanted to make the rest of the trip on horseback. I'd been on a saddle so long, out in the open. I felt stifled, hemmed in on that train. I started riding alone, and was camped one night when five Yankee soldiers rode up on me. Maybe they'd been in the hills all the time. Maybe they didn't know the war was over. I don't know. They had pack horses, and plenty of guns and ammunition. I tried to be friendly, and I thought they were going to be friendly, too. I didn't know until later that Quantrill's bunch had been hounding them. They got off their horses and led them a good ways from my fire. They could have shot me but maybe they wanted some of Quantrill's Raiders to see what they could do to a Reb. One of them had taken a small keg of powder from a pack horse. He had opened it up, and I was close to the fire when he threw it at me. That's how I got these burns."

Smoke paused, aware of Emily's steady gaze on his face. "I don't know how it kept from killing me. I didn't know anything for days. Some members of Quantrill's bunch had found me, and they took me in and saved my life. I was grateful, and made a few raids with them after I got well . . . After the last one along the Kansas border, I knew I couldn't stand any more burning and killing. I abandoned the bunch and came home."

Throughout his talk, Emily had sat quietly looking at him, but Smoke sensed that nothing he had said had altered her opinion of him. He wanted that opinion changed.

"You can't condemn a man for fighting for his rights, Emily."

She said slowly, "I'm sorry I said anything at all, Smoke. It doesn't do any good to plead with people who won't make changes. You won't change."

"I won't stop fighting people who cross me."

"No."

He remembered the way her eyes had darkened and changed when Belle had stared at her on the street. "I think I saw a little bit of a fighting urge in you, Emily," he said, "when we first got to town."

"Yes." Her color heightened. "I often have urges that shame me, but I won't let them dominate my life." Her hands were suddenly restless along the soft leather edges of the handbag. "I'll accept this, Smoke, but only in friendship."

"I bought it in friendship, Emily."

She re-wrapped the handbag and deftly tied the package with twine. "This isn't the kind of thing you'd have bought for Belle, is it?" she asked, smiling.

Smoke Blackbird flushed. "How do you know that?"

"I just do."

The Mission came in sight, and Smoke saw two men standing

near the yard gate. One of them was Reverend Rogers. The other man's back was turned at first, but at sound of the hack he wheeled around, and Smoke instantly recognized Cedar.

Chapter Nine

THE IRON-TIRED wheels of the hack struck the graveled drive, stirring sound like the falling of scattered buckshot. Smoke halted the vehicle and stepped down from it, and said with sincere warmth:

"'Morning, Cedar."

Cedar didn't answer. He stood straight and still, and it was plain that his jealousy was loosened, breeding a rashness in him that could wreak its swift chaos.

Smoke turned and offered his hand to Emily. She came down beside him, glancing at her father and then back to Cedar. Smoke sensed the strain in her, but her cheerful smile quickly hid it.

"This is a surprise visit, Cedar," she called. "How are you?"

Obviously, she was aware of the dark thing that was growing upon him, and her welcoming voice was a contribution to help him quell it. However, Cedar was having no part of that. He took a shuffling step toward her and paused there, an elemental man who had never learned to conceal or tame his emotions. His black stare encompassed her for an instant, then switched to Smoke.

"I went to the shack," Cedar said with distinct antagonism. "I wanted to talk over some things with you. You wasn't there."

"I'll side you back there," Smoke said, "as soon as I saddle my horse."

Cedar stabbed a finger at the hack. "Looks like you're findin' time for high-ridin'!"

"I've been to Stilwell, Cedar. On business."

Cedar's eyes went flat, myopic, then suddenly changed, throwing out their malignant glitter. His thick lips flattened and whitened, then opened to form a soundless curse. His horse stood with trailing reins, ten paces away from him. He wheeled abruptly and crossed that distance and mounted.

Four years of close association with all kinds of men had taught Smoke many lessons. He wanted to say something to Cedar; wanted to speak some word that might bridge the void that was growing wider between them; but he knew instinctively that any talk at all during this moment might fire the fuse of Cedar's rage.

Cedar leaned back and sideward in his saddle, throwing his weight violently against the reins of his horse, heaving it up and around. The horse came down and bolted, racing along the barnlot fence where the patches of sourdock grew. Cedar swerved it out to the road leading toward the Blackbird cabin, and green foliage

and the dark boles of the red-oak trees soon hid him from Smoke's view.

Emily confronted her father. "How long had Cedar been here?" she asked uneasily. "What did he want to talk over with Smoke?"

"He didn't say." The minister moved close to her, placing a lean hand on her shoulder. "Don't look so troubled, child. Some things in life can't be averted, not even by prayer. Go in and fix Smoke's dinner."

"No, thanks," Smoke said quickly. "I'll saddle up and try to overtake Cedar, if you don't mind taking care of this team and rig."

Rogers nodded. "I'll unharness."

"Thanks," Smoke said, and lifted his hat to Emily and strode toward the barnlot gate. He opened the gate and stood a moment, watching Emily hurrying toward the house. At the stoop of the porch she paused briefly and turned to look at him. She smiled, and lifted the handbag slightly, but even from this distance, Smoke sensed that her smile was forced.

Five minutes later, he stopped his horse beside the hack and lifted out his sack of provisions. He tied the sack securely to his saddle and started to mount, then paused.

"Did Cedar have anything at all to say, Reverend?"

"He didn't have time to say anything, except that he'd been to the cabin and found you gone. Then you and Emily came in sight, and he went to pieces. I heard him curse you." The minister's face looked somber. "Has it always been this way between you two? This jealousy, envy, this hatred and bitterness?"

Smoke shook his head. "There was never any lasting hatred or bitterness, at least on my part. I've always felt sorry for him, even when he angered me and I was forced to fight him. Can you understand a thing like that?"

"I understand it."

Smoke pulled in a deep breath and mounted. "I used to be able to reason with him after a fight, but now, after I slapped him last night . . . after that trouble . . . I'm not sure . . ."

"You need to try, Smoke."

"Yes. I'll be trying. But Cedar has changed. He's big, unruly, like some overgrown kid. Last night I almost didn't know him."

Reverend Rogers turned slightly, his far-reaching gaze touching the distant ridge-tops. "If Cedar has anything important to tell you, Smoke, he'll wait at the cabin. If you'll give me a few minutes, there's something I need to say to you."

Smoke nodded and sat waiting in his saddle.

Rogers went on slowly, "I'm thinking of how it is with a man when he rides away to war and then comes back and sees the changes. Not so much the changes on the face of the land. Those things hurt, but a man can absorb them. Changes in people cause most of the trouble." He paused, then said quietly, "I'm not thinking altogether about Cedar."

Smoke pushed his boots down hard against the stirrups, lifting himself and settling again in the saddle. "Who is it you're thinking about, Reverend?" he asked with a faint impatience.

"I didn't come directly home after we separated last night, Smoke."

"You didn't?"

"No."

Their glances locked. Smoke grew still and waiting.

"It was a feeling I had," Rogers said. "At first I thought some of the LeQuire outfit might be hiding in the cabin, waiting to do you harm. I rode back, close enough to see and hear, to know what happened. That woman is another man's wife now, Smoke, in case you didn't know it."

"I know it."

"She's more dangerous to you than bullets, Smoke. She'll steal your soul."

Smoke's temper flared. "You didn't have any right to spy!"

Rogers said calmly, "I didn't know what I'd see."

"You could have pulled out, when you first knew Belle was there!"

Rogers said firmly, "I wouldn't be worthy of my calling, Smoke, if I retreat every time I unexpectedly run into sin."

Smoke knew that his own shame, his own sense of guilt, was causing his present anger and resentment, but he could not seem to hold it in leash. He said hotly, "The trouble with religious people is that they're always looking for something that can be called sin!"

"Don't say things that'll bother your conscience, Smoke."

"I still say you didn't have the right to spy!"

"I would be failing in my duty, Smoke, if I didn't warn you that Belle Ashley will steal your soul!"

Smoke stared at the minister, feeling the strength of the man's sincerity. That sincerity, and the strong flow of the minister's patience, had power to alleviate some of Smoke's resentment. A thought came to him suddenly, and he voiced it, "You knew what happened at the cabin last night . . . and yet, you allowed your daughter to make a trip to town with me, alone, un-chaperoned?"

A faint smile crossed the minister's face. "I know my daughter, Smoke. Also, maybe more than you realize, I know you. There's goodness in you, Smoke, even if the war years have confused you and intensified your leaning toward violence. It isn't in you to harm a woman, unless she brazenly pushes herself upon you. You have pride, though, and you thought it would show weakness if you sent Belle on her way without responding to her challenge. Isn't that it?"

Smoke answered bleakly, "Not all of it."

Rogers lowered his head and his glance moved slowly about him, as if he were searching out the solution to some problem

there on the sun-warmed earth. He lifted his head at last and looked at Smoke steadily.

"No," he said, "I suppose that isn't all of it. A man has hurt you deeply, and last night you had a misguided idea of getting vengeance. You wanted to hurt Mays Ashley."

Smoke straightened in the saddle, and the high noon sun struck brightly against the parchment-like splotches on his face. A dread was growing in him, a smothering sense of despondency that made his voice strangely thick. "Did you . . . tell Emily about what happened last night?"

"I didn't have to tell her, Smoke. She told me she saw Belle pass in the woods late yesterday, going toward the cabin. I guess any woman, knowing Belle, could picture the rest of it."

"Don't pass too harsh a judgment on Belle, Reverend. She had a rough time here during the War."

"Did she?"

"She told me so."

Reverend Rogers sighed. "Many women have told returning soldiers that." His face lifted and his voice grew stern. "I can't let you blight your life, Smoke. I suppose you've read or heard the Scripture: 'The lips of a strange woman . . .'"

"I've heard it." Smoke lifted the reins to ride.

"Wait, Smoke . . ."

"I'm through with Belle," Smoke said curtly. "That's enough said, isn't it?"

Rogers nodded. "If you mean it, yes. And I feel that it's my duty to make sure you mean it. I'm always reluctant to speak badly of anyone, but I have courage enough to speak when a man's soul is at stake. Mays Ashley isn't the only man Belle allowed to court her during the war . . . and some of the men she allowed to court her weren't so rich."

Smoke's galling pride made him shunt aside the implications in the minister's words. "That's hard to believe, Reverend."

"Yes. It's a hard and hurting thing, Smoke. I know that. But what I'm saying is true."

Smoke said through tight lips, and his words carried an acid sting: "Thanks for telling me all these things, Reverend! Maybe some day your talk will convert me . . . and then I can start turning over the solid-looking foundations of people's lives and dragging out all the dirt!"

He rode out swiftly without a backward glance, and the remorse did not catch up with him until he was far on the road toward the cabin.

"I shouldn't have said that," he thought. "I'll have to go back later and apologize."

But this was strange, Smoke thought, and felt a growing wonder at the change in his own thinking. Never before in his life had he seriously considered going back and trying to straighten out the snarls made by his own rash actions. Uncertainty, equivocation,

had never been in Smoke, and with pride and strong resolution he had always fought against the weakening effects of a constantly nagging conscience . . . This change was because of Emily, he thought. A woman could make a man uncertain.

Determined to shake off that feeling, Smoke took out the copy of the Cherokee Advocate and began to search its pages.

Many of the items in the paper were shocking, revealing a political turmoil in the Cherokee Nation greater than even Frank Boyd had suspected. The Southern Cherokees were suspicious of the Northern Cherokees, fearing to trust the latter's delegation to Washington. It was obvious to Smoke as he read that both parties were fighting ruthlessly for control of the political reins of the Nation; and that lack of unity, he knew, was causing graft and other forms of rottenness in the administration of the Government. All these things were leaving the Cherokee Nation vulnerable to the attacks of outside interests, weakening the strength of the Indians.

The Federal Government, he read, was still ignoring the intruder problem. Whole colonies of white settlers were occupying portions of the Cherokee Outlet, and reports of open violence had come from there. Members of prominent Southern Cherokee families who had been displaced during the war were now returning to Flint and Illinois Districts from the Choctaw-Chickasaw country and finding their old homes occupied by belligerent white farmers from Arkansas and Missouri. People of doubtful Cherokee extraction were claiming land rights, and having those rights verified by the use of bribery.

Smoke found no mention of the old Council Ground at Tahlonteeskee; new names, new places filled the paper's sheets. A Grand Council was scheduled to convene in June in the Choctaw country, at a place known as Armstrong Academy. Smoke's interest heightened. At last his attention centered on an item about Stand Watie. The tenacious ex-Confederate general was now in Fort Smith, Arkansas, conferring with Southern Cherokee leaders and contemplating a trip to Washington, where he would contact W. P. Adair, Richard Fields and J. A. Scales.

These were familiar names to Smoke Blackbird. Adair, Fields, Scales and Stand Watie . . . these men had all been friends of Smoke's father before the War. Choate Blackbird's lack of intense partisanship during the War might have weakened that friendship, Smoke thought; but evidently, just before his death, the old Chief had not thought so. Smoke folded the Cherokee Advocate and returned it to his pocket, and the new decision that had started running through his mind gained momentum.

He was vaguely amazed as he rode that the channel of a man's thinking, the course of his life, should alter so swiftly. At sundown three days ago, he had looked at the hills of the Flint District and had felt a renewal of spirit born of thoughts of home and his dreams of Belle Gentry. Now, there was no longer the same

desire in Smoke to work the land on Blackbird Farm, and his dreams of Belle had become without substance, without sustenance, like dust and ashes on the hearth-rock of the cabin where he had succumbed to the call of vengeance and lust.

This day, Smoke had felt warmth from the fire of a new dream in the close presence of Emily Rogers. That dream, he had sensed even as he held it, had sprung from a too swift and a too subtle changing. Emily's closeness had made him briefly exuberant, like the glow of that sparkling champagne he had helped his fellow-Cavalrymen drink from the casks at a house where they had been billeted near Vicksburg.

But the glow of wine, Smoke knew, was elusive, evanescent. There were some things a man could not take to a girl like Emily Rogers; this sense of guilt, and the knowledge that she would always know its source.

Smoke wondered as he rode how long it would take a man to fight free of a feeling of shame and self-condemnation such as this feeling that held him now. Why was this new thing he felt for Emily Rogers so strong that he was reluctant to ever face her again until he was wholly free of condemnation? Was she so pure that no man could ever hope to equal her in goodness? Would she ever tolerate a man who was bound by his innate nature and his heritage to fight—to kill—even—for what belonged to him?

Smoke thought wonderingly, "I never weighed myself this way against Belle's goodness. Maybe it was because she was never good. Or maybe I never cared for her enough. Maybe I was blinded by her beauty. Maybe her beauty kept building those dreams in me, there in the gunsmoke and the filth and blood of war."

Smoke was not despondent in the way of a man who has lost courage, even though his desire to work the land on Blackbird Farm had diminished with the fading of his dreams of a good woman to side him on it. He knew he would fight to re-claim the farm as long as there was strength enough in him to keep fighting. However—and he wondered vaguely if this was weakness—he was more willing than before to trust the courts. He had made his decision, while reading the Advocate, to go to Fort Smith and contact Stand Watie. Smoke would give the fighting ex-Confederate General the papers covering the history of the LeQuire family, and ask him to start action through the Cherokee National Council.

Absorbed with his thoughts, Smoke was lax in his saddle when the road in front of him came alive with Indians. Rifles menaced him as one of them leaped forward and caught the bridle of his horse. Smoke started to draw his gun, then checked it, realizing that he was trapped.

Chapter Ten

THE INDIANS stood impassively, blocking the road and holding their rifles, their black eyes riveted upon Smoke. One of them spat at the hooves of his horse, but outside of that, they remained darkly still and waiting, forming a half-moon arc behind the short one whose left hand gripped the bridle.

Because they were fullbloods, and Smoke knew the subtle reactions of fullbloods, he knew at once how to face them. Their stillness and silence might have struck terror to the heart of a man with lesser knowledge of them, but not to Smoke.

Without speaking, Smoke leaned forward abruptly and slapped the short one's hand loose from the bit.

The short one stepped back with a guttural curse, but he did not come forward again. It wasn't fear of Smoke that held him, Smoke knew. It was respect for a man who had swiftly and unhesitantly revealed his nerve.

Smoke waited a moment, then said mockingly in the Cherokee tongue, "What is this? Is it the play of little children?"

Because Smoke was so much more white than Indian, his use of the Cherokee language intrigued them. Their liquid-black eyes oscillated around at each other. The short one grinned.

To Smoke, that grin was revealing, showing that this thing indeed was half play to them, an urge in simple men of the backwoods to startle him. He glanced on either side of the road, thinking of Fox Chuculate and half expecting to see the shrewd Indian. Instead, Smoke saw Cedar, and knew at once that the Indians were Cedar's cronies.

Cedar stood leaning against the bole of a sweetgum tree, the scarred stock of a long rifle resting between his moccasined feet. It was plain to Smoke that he had got his anger in check, though his eyes were still flecked with a reaching and cynical hardness. There was that in Cedar's glance which reminded Smoke of the way Cedar had looked at him by the fire in the canyon—a look that had held a brazen pleasure at first sight of Smoke's burned face. Always, Smoke thought, Cedar had got his pleasure in odd ways; and now it rested on the thought that Smoke had not known anything about Cedar leaving companions in the woods before going to the Mission—the knowledge that his Indian cronies had startled Smoke. It was a fitting kind of pleasure, Smoke thought, running true to Cedar's childish, erratic ways.

Smoke's pride came alive, and he swung out of the saddle with a cool abandon which he did not wholly feel. He said in English, wanting to test their knowledge of the language: "Or maybe this is not the play of children. Maybe it's the play of courageous men, wanting to shanghai me into the games some men play. Games like dice or cards." When he sensed that they hadn't clearly understood him, he smiled and knelt in the center of the road. He made

card-riffling motions with his supple hands, then drew one hand back with his fist balled loosely and shook it and swept it out and open.

That friendly gesture got across to the Indians at once. A young one with a round, cherubic face stepped forward, grinning hugely and kneeling in front of Smoke. He said, his black eyes questioning, "Bones? Craps? Stud poker?" He smoothed out a place on the sand. "No got moola, no jack. Got keg Choc' beer on Elk Creek. Shoot whole keg!"

Smoke was aware that Cedar had moved out to the road and stopped behind the young Indian. Cedar said commandingly, "Tiger!" and the Indian stood up. Cedar stepped around him and confronted Smoke. "We ain't got no time for foolishness! I told you back at the Mission I wanted some talk from you!"

Smoke rose. "What's bothering you, Cedar? We'll talk, just as soon as we get to the cabin."

"We'll talk here!"

"I don't know your friends, Cedar. I don't like to talk around strangers."

Cedar's lips twisted. "They're my friends. They ought to be your friends. They need food, clothes, maybe some money. White settlers on our farm eat good. All the time, we smell stuff cookin'. We aim to go get what we need."

Smoke held his temper with an effort. "You know better than to try something like that, Cedar."

"Hell! I don't want that kind of talk from you, Brother Smoke! We want you with us. You ain't goin' to no Councils! And you ain't doin' no fightin'. You want to ride buggies, don't you? . . . with some girl you can han' your sweet talk to!"

Smoke clamped his lips, holding back words that would bring on instant violence. The group of Indians hovered close around them, watching them silently.

Cedar said hoarsely, "I don't aim for you to go around by yourself in this country, talking to people I like, turning them against me! I'm aimin' for you to ride with me!"

Smoke said with forced calmness, "Talk like that won't get us anywhere, Cedar. You know I haven't tried to turn anybody against you. And if you and your friends are hungry, come to the shack and we'll cook and eat."

Cedar swept that aside with a violent gesture. "You're ridin' where I ride!" he repeated. "All your life, you've been havin' th' good things . . . schools, and trips to town, and fun around pretty women! It was hinted around that I'd been hit on th' head, and somethin' was wrong with me so I didn't have sense enough to get me a little book-learnin'!" He stopped and pulled in a rasping breath. "Like hell I didn't have no sense! Pap didn't send me to school 'cause he thought my dam' black face might ruin him! . . . Well, I ain't goin' to keep hidin' in th' brush no longer! And I ain't lettin' you keep your dam' rep clean by hangin' around that

Mission! My Pap was your Pap! We was both brought up by the same woman! I ain't gonna let you stay by yourself and act like you ain't no kin to me! You're ridin' with me an' these fullbloods, an' we're gonna raid them settlers' camps on Blackbird Farm! Then we're goin' into any dam' town we choose, an' we're gonna eat together in places where whites and Cherokees eat, an' we're gonna stop this talk that folks have been mouthin'! It ain't th' color or look of a man's face that counts, nohow. I knowed that, when I saw you ridin' with Emily Rogers!"

Smoke said gently, "You could say these things to me in private, Cedar. Not here, not now."

"Hell!" Cedar said, glaring at Smoke. "You think these fullbloods understand English?"

"I doubt it. Anyhow, you've talked enough."

"Not yet," Cedar growled. "Not yet . . . It ain't th' color of a man's face at all that makes any difference to women! You've got a face that'd make a hump-backed squaw go runnin' for cover . . . but Em went to town with you! She was fancied up, too, lookin' happy an' proud. She never went to town with me!"

Smoke said through dry lips, "That's all I want to hear from you."

"It ain't th' color of a man's face at all," Cedar pressed. "And it can't be the blood in a man, 'cause that's out of sight; and when a thing's out of sight it's like Pap's secret; a man can go on for a long time and get a lot of good things out of life . . . and even if I get my throat cut, when my blood spills out it won't be black an' ugly like Pap's secret. It'll be clean and red, like any man's blood; just as red an' clean as yours!"

"You're raving like a whipped kid, Cedar. No reason to your talk at all!"

Cedar's face looked swollen with the rush of blood to his temples. "You'll catch it, though," he said hoarsely. "You'll catch my reasonin' after you stick close to me for a few months . . . after we've rammed this talk about me down people's throats, an' killed the LeQuires an' Ashley, an' chased them settlers across th' Arkansas line! After I've proved to Em that it ain't a man's face or the blood he's got that counts!"

"We won't be in this country, Cedar."

"What?"

Perhaps the roots of this decision had been planted in Smoke's mind back at the Mission, when he had watched his half-brother's self-centered rage and jealousy make Cedar mount and ride away like a frustrated and fleeing child. In physical strength and size, Cedar was not a child; there was power to maim and kill in his knife and gun, and Smoke sensed the will for destruction confronting him now in the shape of Cedar's stance and belligerent mien.

"What?" Cedar repeated harshly.

"I'm going to side you out of this country, Cedar," Smoke said.

"As soon as I get back from a trip I have to make, we're leaving."

"You ain't goin' to stay here an' fight? You ain't goin' to farm our land?"

"Sometime, maybe. Right now, I'm not sure about that. I'm going to Fort Smith and talk to Stand Watie. I'm going to put his power in the Councils behind our case. I've a strong feeling he can win for us. While he works on the case, we're going to be out of the Nation . . . maybe in Texas, or in the Choctaw or Chickasaw country. I'm going to help you start a new life for yourself, somewhere far off where nobody knows you."

"I guess that's what you promised ol' Pap?" Cedar's query was hoarse and strained.

"Our Dad had wisdom, Cedar."

Cedar stood staring at Smoke. A mixture of animal-like perception and wariness crossed his face. "I catch on," he growled roughly. "You want to take me off somewhere and have me marry a black wench, and make me start livin' like my own kind! Then you can come back and live fat on our land . . . maybe with Em!"

"Emily Rogers won't ever marry either of us, Cedar. You ought to know her well enough to know that."

Cedar's face dipped forward. "You want her, though, don't you? I feel it! You want all the good things, the way you've always had them! You want to hide me away, like Pap hid me off in the woods when he lived at Tahlequah!"

Smoke's patience snapped. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Cedar! If you have any sense at all, you know you can't start riding rough-shod across this country! There'll never be anything here for you except trouble . . . and maybe a hang-rope or a bullet from ambush, like Fox Chuculate said! If we win back the farm—and I'll get it back even if I have to organize fighting men to take possession of it—I'll raise money to pay you for your part, and bring the money to you."

Cedar said flatly, "If you can raid, I can!"

Smoke watched the rashness building on Cedar's face and felt again the old inward sickness. "I'd fight the LeQuires directly, not unprotected white people, and I wouldn't be robbing and raiding . . . I hate to say this, Cedar, but I know we have to face the truth. You can't ever cross the line and be looked upon as either white or Indian; but you can build a respectable place for yourself among people of your race."

Half-turning, Smoke studied the group of Indians, recognizing them for the kind of men they were . . . unschooled and trusting, ragged and unkempt, as far removed from educated Cherokees as the poor whites in the deep South were removed from the whites who lived in mansions. Yet, there was a unique proudness and courage about these fullbloods; and their unthinking courage, Smoke knew, might make them follow Cedar to their doom.

Feeling impelled to voice his thoughts, Smoke faced the Indians squarely and spoke in the Cherokee tongue:

"Young men . . . loyal followers of the Blackbirds! I see the urge in you to fight intruders, and I am glad! The guns you hold may soon be needed to help us reclaim the land which was given by treaty to the Cherokees! . . . as long as grass grows and water flows, the treaty said! But that time of fighting is not yet! Cedar has perhaps fired your blood with his talk of raiding, but only cowardly wolves and weasels attack and slay the helpless. Cedar has suffered much, and we are sorry for him, but we cannot trust his judgment. Right-thinking warriors do not stoop to raids on defenseless people. White settlers on Elk Creek are not skilled in the use of arms. Wait for the word of a wise, strong leader!"

Cedar said with a ruthless mockery, "So you're that wise, strong leader? Or is it Fox?"

Smoke ignored Cedar and kept watching the fullbloods. They shifted and looked at him uneasily, and he knew he had given them food for thought.

"Fox Chuculate is weak," Cedar said, "like any dam' man that comes to a fight late and starts tellin' how he will do things. He sowed doubt in these good warriors of mine . . . the way you're tryin' to do now . . . and then he acted like we was scum under his feet and left us!"

Smoke's temper was a strong flame as he wheeled and stood there; an ex-guerrilla raider with some of the stark slough of war clinging to him; a man whose recent strenuous living had left him thin. "Disband this outfit, Cedar!" he said commandingly. "Stay in the woods and keep out of trouble until I get back from Fort Smith. Then we'll travel."

Cedar looked at his Indian companions and then back to Smoke, and his face underwent a subtle change of expression that Smoke did not miss. It was the expression of a man who had suddenly bumped headlong into a thought that shocked him at first and then pleased him; and when Cedar spoke at last it was in the Cherokee language, loudly and mockingly for the benefit of the Indians:

"Listen to this strong kinsman of mine who says he will speak with Stand Watie! He boasts of his wiseness, and his face shows his wiseness, like the face of a spotted owl! But I am the hawk, who flies above the perch of the owl and strikes swiftly! The owl is like an old woman, long-thinking, but slow and weak and given to hootings of death!"

Smoke Blackbird stared at Cedar and hid his astonishment, realizing for the first time what Cedar's constant life in the woods had made him; an earthy man, poetic, erratic and wilful; uneducated and ignorant to the ways of whites and more fortunate mixed-bloods, but inoculated to the ways of the wild and the oratory of fullbloods.

Smoke realized also that whatever impact his own talk to the

Indians had held, Cedar's oratory had wiped it out. The Indians looked at Smoke and slapped their thighs and laughed.

Cedar laughed with them, then resumed his rapid talk. "Let this spotted-owl old woman kinsman of mine go make his speech to the other old women! Let him send out a plea to the Councils, like the cry of an unclothed old woman in a ragged wigwam when the cold sleet blows from the North! His cry may bring the Le-Quires, who will kill him for daring to hoot in the Councils! This is enough said, cousins!"

Cedar laughed in Smoke's face and then wheeled to the roadside, making an imperious gesture to the Indians. The Indians lifted their rifles and followed Cedar, their moccasined feet stirring through last year's fallen foliage toward the place where their horses were hidden.

Smoke stood in the road and listened to their guttural talk as they mounted; and then the fast rush of hoofsounds drifted to him, fading out gradually and blending with the sound of the wind.

Smoke mounted and rode on to the cabin, feeling ill-tempered and inadequate to the situations which confronted him. He had jumped into a snare of his own making when he had attempted that speech in the tongue of the fullbloods. He had thought with a sense of pride at first that it had gone exceedingly well; but Cedar, with his telling phrases of mockery, had made a fool of him.

"I've lived too long in the company of white men," Smoke thought bleakly. "I can't block Cedar by bracing him openly, and I can't get it across to him that I care for him as a brother. He's past my help."

Yet, while he unsaddled and freed his horse and carried the sack of groceries to the cabin, Smoke knew with a dogged determination that he would not abandon Cedar and let him continue living as an outcast. Remembering that subtle change in Cedar's expression before he had made his rebuttal to Smoke's speech, Smoke was vaguely puzzled. It wasn't like Cedar, the way he had suddenly abandoned his questions and sharp recriminations about Smoke's intentions to take him out of the Territory. Had Cedar feared that Smoke's speech had swayed the Indians to his side? Had fear inspired Cedar's rush of eloquence? Remembering that half-pleased look on Cedar's face, Smoke thought not.

Another thought came to Smoke as he entered the cabin. Though Cedar had always been erratic in many ways, it was against his nature to abandon a course of action once he had started it. He had brazenly told Smoke he was going to make a raid on the settlers who were occupying land along Elk Creek.

Cedar would make that raid, Smoke felt certain. Would he make it tonight, or today?

The interior of the cabin smelled musty and oppressive, filled with the mid-day heat. A packrat scurried in a far corner as Smoke deposited his sack of provisions on the rude table and turned to prop open the rear door with a stick of firewood. He

turned again and was crossing the room to open the front door when a bland voice said from above him:

"You show a fool's lack of caution, Smoke, considering you're a hunted man."

Chapter Eleven

SMOKE RECOGNIZED the voice at once, but even recognition didn't stop the tingling chill that rushed through his body nor deter his hand from streaking for his holstered gun. He had the gun out and tilted upward, all in the space of a heartbeat. He said with a startled harshness:

"Don't ever do a thing like that again, Fox!"

Fox was sprawled on the rough-hewn joists of the cabin, in the dimness near the sharp-sloped eaves. He came down with a pantherish litheness, watching Smoke's gunhand, and said with feigned coolness, "Stash that cannon and keep remembering the lesson. What do you mean, busting in here like a man in his sleep?"

Smoke holstered his gun and stood a moment without answering, letting the shock drain out of him. "I've got too many things on my mind, Fox," he said at last. "It was a crazy thing to do, wasn't it?"

"Did you let things on your mind disarm you, on the scouts you made in the War?"

"I didn't have so many troubles then, Fox . . . not the kind of troubles I have now."

"No woman's worth it . . . at least not the one you're troubled about."

Smoke smiled wryly. "You're sharp like a prowling fox, all right," he said. "But even a fox can miss some things. I wasn't worrying about a woman this time."

"Don't tell me the LeQuires have you spooked?"

"No. It's Cedar."

"Why?"

"He's taking a bunch of fullbloods down to Blackbird Farm. They're going to make a raid on those white farmers, today or tonight."

Fox Chuculate stared at Smoke and said scornfully, "Cedar? Why, he wouldn't know how to lead an organized raid on a bumble-bee's nest! Lynx cats don't travel in packs!"

Smoke said grimly, "Don't make the mistake of underestimating Cedar . . . not the way I did."

Fox eased himself down on the edge of the bed and stayed quiet awhile, waiting as Smoke went to the front door and opened it to let in more light and air.

"That was a neat thing you did in town, Fox," Smoke said. "Thanks. Bashing Chain with that bottle might have saved my life."

"No MIGHTS about it," Fox said with an unabashed show of egotism. "I saved you. You're indebted to me. Now I want a favor from you."

Smoke nodded and sat down beside the Indian. "Fire."

Fox said at once, "I can't live in town any more, after that fracas today. I know how to live in the brush, but I never liked it. I want to get out of this country. I want your permission to leave."

"You don't have to ask my permission to do anything, Fox."

Fox rose and stood before Smoke. "You're a Blackbird! As far back as anyone can remember, some Blackbird has been a Cherokee leader! Don't make light of a Blackbird's authority! Assume your position! . . . and don't ever stoop to telling me or any other Cherokee that we don't need your permission to act!"

Smoke looked up at the Indian wonderingly without speaking.

Fox's next words came in a sibilant rush, "That was a farcical thing I said, about you being indebted to me. My damnable attempts at humor never seem to have the right effects! Maybe it's because at heart I'm a hard man without the common touch, a man who believes in and always tries to support the aristocracy!"

Strong feeling flowed from the Indian, filling the dingy room. Smoke stood up and said uneasily, "You're driving a wedge, Fox, but I fail to see the log you're trying to split. Where is it?"

"A wedge suggests mauls, and other things awkward and bruising," Fox answered. "A cumbersome picture. My mind fights away from it! Let's say I'm shooting an arrow, whose target your eyes cannot reach."

"Nor my imagination, either," Smoke said, smiling slightly. "I'd rather you'd get to the point."

Fox paced the floor for a moment, then halted with dramatic suddenness and stood with his dark face lifted. "Let the arrow strike, then," he said decisively. "It has crossed a great distance, and the target is dim and elusive still yet! What I shall gain with the arrow's striking is unpredictable . . . perhaps regret and infamy, and abandonment during my old age. But so shall it be, whatever the consequences! . . . I want your permission to take your fight against the LeQuires to the Councils myself! I want to visit Oowatie . . . this great man whom our people call Stand! I want to speak to our leaders with the humbleness of a martyred spirit, and brush away this scandal that has shadowed the Blackbird name! Brushing away of this scandal will re-instate the power of a Blackbird, and make the winning of your case against the LeQuires as certain as the rising of tomorrow's sun!"

Fox paused, but Smoke had the feeling that his words were going on endlessly, like the flight of that imaginative arrow whose shaft in Smoke's mind had suddenly burst out into an astonishing and livid flame.

"I want to tell the world," Fox finished, "that a seed which was sown on wild ground was my seed! . . . That this cynical, stupid, irresponsible man whom you call your half-brother, is my son!"

Smoke flinched, as if some sharp, hurting object had struck him; as if the swift, flaming shaft of that arrow had burst through his head and consumed all his mind with its heat.

"Damn you, Fox!" he said weakly, and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Damn your Indian flights of fancy! What are you trying to say?"

Globules of sweat showed distinctly on the dark skin of Chuculate's forehead. Plainly, the speech had sapped him; but as he sat down beside Smoke, his portion of white blood took the forefront, revealing itself in calm and rational talk.

"I told it my way," he said. "I'm happy. . . . I let a friend of my youth carry a burden for me too many years. That friend is dead and buried in a canyon south of Elk Creek, but I won't let his only son assume the load. . . . I had Frona caught with child before Choate ever touched her."

"Frona?"

"Cedar's mother."

Smoke stared at the Indian with a mounting incredulity. "Fox . . . are you telling the truth?"

"I'll soon be an old man, Smoke. Lying is no longer one of my vices."

"I can't believe it! I don't understand it! Why . . . ?"

"Why did your father take responsibility for the child? He thought the child belonged to him." Fox wiped the sweat from his face and sat looking out through the rear door of the cabin. Half turned toward him, Smoke watched him, sensing that Chuculate's mind was spanning back across the years.

"Some things in life are not pretty," Fox said. "This story I'm going to tell you is perhaps one of those ugly things, at least part of it. However, I do not hold that all things which some people cringe away from and stare at in horror, are necessarily either bad or ugly. Some people who throw up their hands in horror are as bad at heart as those whose impulses make them commit deeds against moral codes; and often when those deeds are known, only the ugly parts are brought to the light . . . Let's build a picture of your father, young Choate Blackbird . . .

"Think of a man—a young man, hot-blooded and strong and pulsing with life—living in the close, rich heat of early summer, with his wife too heavy with child to occupy the marriage bed. Think of him surpervising the work of slaves in the cornfields, watching the hoes flashing in the sun, and the bodies of the women bending and straightening, and their dresses clinging to their thighs with sweat. The young ones could laugh, and look at a man sideward; and Frona was young and basic and eager, and she was just enough white to make her crave something she

thought she might never be able to get. That thing was the love and protection of a white man, even if it had to be secret—that, and her instinctive urge to get some small security for the child—my child—which she would give birth to eight months later.

"I was an orphan, young, irresponsible and brash, living with the Blackbirds in the Old Nation. Your father and I had always been as close as brothers. I talked to him of everything I did, except one thing. I never told him I had been with Frona . . . Right after she was caught with my child, she told me. Because I was planning a life in politics, I knew the secret would ruin me. I left and came to live among the Western Cherokees. I never knew, until years later when Choate Blackbird moved here, that Frona had seduced him, made him think Cedar was his child."

"Frona died when the child was born, but the trouble didn't stop there. Choate's affair with Frona had made him detest slavery and everything it stood for. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he knew that slaves were human, filled with the capacity for love and compassion just as whites were. Because he thought Frona's child was his child, he could not bear to leave the baby in slavery, perhaps to be raised by another master, maybe a cruel one. Choate Blackbird had made his decision never again to own slaves. He kept that decision from the time he moved here.

"I suppose no one will ever know what kind of a struggle Choate had with your mother. Obviously, however, she must have loved Choate very much. They must have talked it out thoroughly. You are in fact about seven months older than Cedar, but your father told everyone that Cedar was his son by a previous marriage to a Cherokee woman. When Cedar was small, people might have believed it. However, as he grew it was plain that he was negroid. Your father didn't have him placed in the schools because he knew that Cherokee schools wouldn't accept him. Then, too, Choate hoped to spare Cedar embarrassment. Choate didn't keep Cedar isolated with friends in the backwoods wholly because he was afraid of what the secret would do to his political life. Your father loved Cedar as his own."

Fox paused, and Smoke asked the question that had started clamoring at his mind. "Did you ever tell Dad the truth, about Cedar being your son?"

"Would you have told him, after months and years had gone by? After you knew he loved the child? . . . No, I didn't tell him."

"Why are you telling me now?"

Fox stared out through the open doorway. "I'm telling you because I can't stand by and watch Cedar bind your hands. You need to take the place your father once held in affairs of this troubled country. When you're free of Cedar—when you've reclaimed the Farm and the Blackbird name can command respect again—you can do that. I told you, I believe in the elite, the aristocracy, of any peoples. Cedar means nothing to me. He's a clod,

a fungus. It's possible I even hate him . . . I know I did when I first laid eyes on him. I was never like Choate Blackbird. I was never a warm-hearted man, willing to stoop to help the stupid and ineffectual plodders. That is why I was never a great leader. By shrewdness and conniving, I managed to secure one term in the Cherokee National Council, but that, as far as politics go, was the end of me. When I first saw Cedar, the ugly-tempered son I'd spawned, I had the feeling that something I'd spewed out in a youthful frenzy behind some barn had taken root in the filth and sprung to monstrous life to mock me."

Smoke got up and paced the floor, still shocked and burdened by the things the Indian had told him. "Something has to be done about Cedar, Fox. I think of him as a brother. It will always be that way."

"Take him out of this country, the way your father wanted it, the way it has to be. Get him out of your life."

"He will refuse to go."

"Maybe he won't, after everybody knows he isn't a Blackbird. Maybe he'll be glad to take whatever portion of property you can sell for him, and get out of your life for good."

Smoke struggled for clear thought. "How do you expect to make people believe you're Cedar's father? And anyway, Dad WAS intimate with a colored slave girl. We can't dodge that."

"Can't we?" Fox Chuculate smiled. "Don't underestimate my ability to mislead people."

"You said you were through lying, Fox."

"I said it with mental reservations. To protect the name of the last remaining Blackbird, I'll lie! Be patient and listen! If I tell the public the real truth as I've told it to you, this gesture I intend to make will be futile. This is what the public will hear from me:—In my youth, when I was filled with ambitions to become a great leader in politics, a colored girl has died while giving birth to our illegitimate child. Outraged, grief-stricken, angered, her parents have demanded that I take the child. All the slaves on the farm are worked up! I am afraid for my life. I DO take the child, promising them that it will be placed in good hands and be raised as a Cherokee. . . . Then, unscrupulous man that I am, I go to my friend, Choate Blackbird. I tell him that a FULLBLOOD CHEROKEE GIRL . . . not a Negro girl . . . has died giving birth to the son that is mine. I tell Choate Blackbird that the Cherokee girl's parents have objected to our marriage because of the wild streak in me. Now, after her death, enraged members of her family are out to kill me! I must go away, quickly, and never return, but I want my son taken care of. I plead with my friend, Choate Blackbird, to take the child until some future date when I can send for it. At last he agrees, not knowing that the child is part Negro. As the months go by, and I never return for the child, Choate Blackbird has become attached to it. He keeps it . . .

Don't you see the story, how plausible it will be? . . . How easy it will be to . . . ?

Smoke interrupted coldly, "I won't allow any man to perpetrate such a hoax on the public. Forget it!"

Fox's buck-teeth clicked together, then opened again. "Not even to give an unsullied name to some woman you may love . . . some woman with the quiet pride and decorum of Emily Rogers?"

Smoke looked at Chuculate and considered that gravely.

Almost savagely, Fox pressed his point: "Search long enough behind the lives of any great men and you'll find weaknesses, scandals! Why do those men struggle to hide those dark minutes, or hours, or even months that could very well wreck their lives? Why are false conceptions built before the avid, gossiping public? Because those men are cowards, borne down by personal fear? No! Not at all times! Those men are strong enough to keep struggling for respect, not because they think they deserve it. They do it to protect their loved ones from the heel-biting and the yowling of the pack! I can tell the public that Choate Blackbird took a homeless waif he thought was Cherokee at first, and raised it as his own! I can point out that Choate Blackbird did not abandon the child, even after he knew it was part Negro! He kept it isolated, to be sure, to protect his OWN son from scandal—but he was warm-hearted enough not to abandon that Negro child completely, as many other lesser men might have done! . . . Aren't you strong enough to live with that kind of secret, Smoke, if I can make certain it will never backfire?"

Smoke asked wearily, "How are you going to do that?"

"By bringing Frona's mother here, if necessary. By PROVING that the child Frona bore is my son!" Fox's glance held steadily upon Smoke. "When the scandal first broke here, I knew what I had to do. I'm not a sentimental man, generally, but there are some things a man can't dodge and keep living with himself. I went back to Tennessee and Georgia. I traveled and searched and asked questions. In a hovel down in the tobacco country, I found Frona's old mother. Frona had told her everything, even about her plans to make Choate think the child she was carrying belonged to him. Frona's mother detested that plan, and she will never speak anything against the Blackbird family, because the family was so kind to her. But I can bring her here, if necessary, and she will swear to what I speak!" Fox's voice lowered and became unsteady. "I . . . came back, intending to tell Choate the truth about Cedar, but I found The Chief on the point of death, and I . . . well, I just couldn't tell him. I should have. I should have let him know that you, his own son, had a chance . . ."

"No," Smoke said. "He thought Cedar was his own, and he loved him. I know that. I'm glad you didn't tell Dad, Fox." Smoke turned to the door and looked out into the wash of sunlight. The hills rose eastward, softened by the distance and the faint heat-haze. Strangely, irrelevantly, a picture took shape in Smoke's

mind; a picture of Emily Rogers sitting on the seat of a hack beside him, riding through the aisles of the forest on a crooked and sunlit road. He made his decision in that moment, but there were questions in him. He said, wonderingly: "What are you going to get out of all this, Fox?"

"My reasons are wholly unselfish . . . almost." Fox came to the door and stood beside Smoke, smiling with a show of his buck teeth. "A conniving politician, however, seldom misses any angles. I'm almost broke. I have enough to keep me, perhaps long enough to help you win your case against the LeQuires. After that . . . well, I wouldn't ask any concessions from you, but it pains me to think that my wife may have to support me by doing drudgery in some hash house for years to come. A quiet little spot on the Blackbird homestead would seem ideal for our old age. That would also show that the friendship of the Blackbirds is a constant and continuing thing."

"You'll be more than welcome to that," Smoke said. "I'm thinking of what your public confession will do to you, and to your wife."

Fox shrugged. "It has long since been made clear to me that my peculiar talents are no longer wanted in affairs of the Nation . . . not even by Stand Watie, even though he will go far to help me, for reasons you'll have to guess. As for Sally, she's a simple, uneducated fullblood, very patient and very adaptable . . . Shall I take those papers now?"

"When will you leave?"

"Late tomorrow . . . at least not later than that."

Smoke hesitated, then took out the papers his father had given him, and handed them to Fox. "Tell Stand Watie my reasons for not presenting these personally. Tell him I have to take an unruly man to Texas, before a War is started along Elk Creek."

Fox clicked his teeth. "Don't let Cedar's threats upset you. He may slip in and steal something from those farmers. He won't make an organized raid. He has threatened to do that for weeks, and nothing has ever happened. He MIGHT raid, with you to side him and his cronies. Otherwise, he won't."

"I wish I could be certain of that, Fox."

"You can be. Don't worry about him. Wipe him out of your conscience as I have done, or look upon him as a fungus growth which needs to be eradicated."

Smoke said tonelessly, "I can't do that, Fox. I don't see how you can. He's blood of your blood . . ."

Fox cut in sharply, "But not heart and soul and spirit of me! A real son of a man is conceived in love! . . . If you can get him out of this country, well and good. If not, I want you to keep playing the lone wolf. Stay in the woods while I'm gone, and keep clear of LeQuire gunmen. Travel on foot when you scout around. I'm sure Reverend Rogers will take care of your horse and gear at the Mission. That'll give you an excuse to visit Emily now and

then." Fox smiled. "I'd stake my life on the bet that a few visits with Emily will make you forget Belle Ashley!"

Smoke switched the subject. "Tell Stand Watie we want fast action to evict the LeQuires . . . before I get impatient and go take the Farm by force."

Fox nodded and said musingly, "Stand Watie . . . a man defeated in war, who still holds as much power as those who vanquished his army. That is the kind of leadership I dreamed of. Unfortunately, I lacked the touch."

Smoke said with conviction, "We all lack some things." He hesitated and weighed his next words. "I'll try to be strong in the way you mentioned, Fox. I'll try to stay armed and alert behind whatever fortress you can build around the Blackbird name. Not because I'm thinking of a public life. I'll be thinking of a woman I might someday marry . . . and of Blackbird children yet unborn!"

Chapter Twelve

LONG AFTER Fox Chuculate had gone, Smoke paced the floor of the cabin, thinking of the Indian's strange story and feeling a need for action to alleviate his growing concern for Cedar.

A man of sharp insight though Chuculate plainly was, Smoke felt certain that the Indian had underestimated Cedar's capacity for violence. Cedar's threat to make a raid against the settlers on Blackbird land still haunted Smoke's mind, and he knew the feeling would intensify as the hours dragged past him, unless he contacted Cedar and made sure Cedar's plans were blocked.

But how to make that contact was a problem. Absorbed by Chuculate's story, Smoke had not thought to ask the Indian where Cedar and the fullbloods habitually camped. Somewhere along the lower reaches of Elk Creek, probably, since the Indian called Tiger had mentioned having a keg of Choctaw beer stashed there. However, between this cabin and the mouth of Elk Creek were hundreds of lonely hollows and brush-choked canyons where whole cavalry platoons could hide without being spotted. Which canyon would Cedar have picked for a hide-out?

Waiting here in the cabin was impossible, Smoke knew at last. He struck up a fire in the chimney and hurriedly cooked and ate, then went out and caught and saddled his horse. He mounted and rode toward the new homes of the settlers on Blackbird Farm, determined to find a point of vantage and keep watch on the houses until nightfall.

After nightfall, Smoke knew, his watch over the farm would be futile. Cedar and the fullbloods could strike swiftly and ruthlessly under cover of darkness, and melt away in the forest again

like shadows. No one could spot them and make an effort to stop them then.

At mid-afternoon, Smoke reined out on the flintrock ridge from which he had surveyed the farm the day before. The picture was still the same, except that it was devoid of riders, of movement. And that stillness and silence, Smoke thought, was strange. He checked the time by his watch, and knew that around in the green fields some of those settlers should be working. He looked at the houses and the three-faced camps intently, puzzled by their obvious desertion; then, with a sudden insight that made him smile, he remembered that this was Saturday.

It was almost a universal thing, Smoke thought, for Southern farmers; for men and women and children, a Saturday afternoon in town . . .

Smoke's tension dwindled, smoothed out by the thought that even if Cedar made a raid today, he could do the settlers no bodily harm. The most he could do, Smoke thought, was steal . . .

Or burn!

Smoke's lean fingers stroked the face of his big silver watch as he brooded on that; and again, as so often of late, he saw houses in his mind going up in flames in the wake of Quantrill's raiders. His mind shunted away from those thoughts; he did not want them; they burdened him. Those settlers on Blackbird land, by all accounts, should be his enemies; but he knew quite suddenly, and thought how strange it was, that he didn't want the homes of those settlers burned.

There had been a time, Smoke thought, when he would have burned those homes of intruders himself. The knowledge that he was incapable of doing it now made him acutely aware of the change that was taking place in his nature.

He looked at the houses and the three-faced camps, and up the valley to the solid old Blackbird home; and all at once, as if some shadow had been lifted from his mind, he realized that he had not come here solely to prevent Cedar from being shot or captured or hanged. He had made this trip because he had been concerned partly for the well-being of these peaceful farmers and their women and children . . . intruders in the Cherokee Nation, but people, all of them, having the capacity to suffer from losses and be hurt by tragedy and pain.

"I must be weakening," Smoke murmured. "Maybe I'm getting soft . . . too soft to even fight the LeQuires. Maybe I'm . . ."

His murmured soliloquy broke off with the sound of the shot; he reeled violently sideward, feeling the knife-slash of pain go lancing across his left arm. Blood spouted, warming his wrist and fingers, and the next shot, close and ringing, took leather from the horn of his saddle as he straightened up and clawed for slack reins. His horse had already bolted, streaking straight over the crest of the ridge.

Smoke found the reins and heaved on them, but he was too late to check the headlong rush of his horse. It dropped over the lip of a bluff and struck with its shod hooves ringing on flint. It lunged against the bit and sagged and skidded, and Smoke left the saddle on the off-side, still clinging to one of the reins. Momentum sent him staggering against a blackjack sapling; his horse pulled him, riding the sapling down.

Striking the earth on his right side, Smoke felt tension leave the single rein he was holding, and he knew that his horse had stopped. He rose to his knees and took one look back toward the bluff, and saw that heavy green foliage hid it completely, as well as the topmost crest of the ridge.

Facing about, Smoke saw that his horse's panic was fading. Trust of Smoke showed in its intelligent eyes. A swift strategy formed in Smoke's mind, and he put it into action at once. He drew his old Barlow knife with his bloody left hand, and opened it with his teeth, still holding the bridle rein with his right hand. He pulled the horse toward him until its warm breath touched his cheek, and cut the rein neatly, close up against the shank of the bit.

Smoke offered a murmured apology to this game and loyal beast that had carried him across so many long miles of travel. Then, coming to his feet with a sudden and terrifying lunge, he struck the horse stingingly across its muzzle with the close-held tip of the rein.

The horse spun around and bolted, and Smoke followed it at a dead run under the green overhang, yelling at it and slashing its rump with the rein. For more than two hundred feet down the slope of the mountain, Smoke matched the horse's skidding, scrambling pace, yelling at it as though riding it frantically out of gun range. Then, swerving with the turn of the slope and stopping, he listened as the horse kept going until distance dimmed the sound.

Stuffing the cut rein into his pocket, Smoke sat down and pulled off his boots. Placing them against the gnarled bole of a blackjack tree, he rose and drew his gun, and started on his soundless way back toward the crest of the ridge.

This was a kind of game he had been trained for, on long and grueling marches and scouting expeditions through unknown forests during the war. Smoke had no doubts he could win this game, provided the ambusher on the ridge thought Smoke was still on his horse.

That unease was the only unease in Smoke. His progress through the dense undergrowth was as silent as that of a cat.

He angled to the left, his sharp gaze scanning the thickets, and cutting sideward often to watch for the rim of the bluff. When its white flint edges showed, he went down flat on his belly a moment, breathing a little too fast from tenseness, weighing the distance to the bluff in his mind and trying to remember distinctly

from which direction away from the bluff the sound of those shots had come.

He was inching up, still watching the bluff, when he saw and recognized Cedar.

Smoke's astonishment was shocking, complete.

Cedar had fired two shots at Smoke from close range. Those shots had been aimed to kill him. Close as Cedar had been to Smoke, there was no chance that he had been mistaken in Smoke's identity.

How Cedar had missed was a mystery. An act of God, Smoke thought, and was stilled by the thought. Or perhaps Cedar's hands on the rifle had twitched from the knowledge that he was shooting to kill a man whom he thought was his own half-brother.

Cedar stood at the edge of the bluff, half turned away from Smoke, holding his rifle and looking far out across the valley. His tense face revealed the unease that was upon him; obviously, he was listening for the sound of Smoke's horse, but that sound had vanished.

Smoke's outrage and anger was all-consuming, filling him with a withering scorn and contempt. His gray-blue eyes, narrow and shining under the stiff black lashes, held none of the old reluctance and sorrow now. While Cedar was turned slightly from him, looking toward the upper reaches of the valley, Smoke rose to a half-crouch and started running straight up the slope through a narrow defile in the rocks. The depth of the defile hid him completely, as had the thickets behind whose screen he had reached it; and at last, clambering out through the defile's last rugged steepness, he saw the flat terrain of the ridge-top leading on out to the rim of the bluff.

Cedar still stood there, watching and listening.

For the space of a minute, Smoke did not move. His gaze swept from Cedar to the edge of a patch of buckbrush, and all along it; he was wondering if any of the fullbloods were close. Then, satisfied that Cedar was alone, Smoke stood up and walked straight toward him.

"Drop that gun, Cedar! Then turn around!"

Cedar spun around before he dropped the rifle, his dark face tilting forward like that of a jaundiced hawk.

"Drop it, Cedar!" Smoke repeated. "Quick!"

Cedar dropped the rifle, but he had an iron control, startled as he obviously was. He looked into the muzzle of Smoke's gun, his copper-flecked eyes steady and unblinking.

"You tried to kill me, didn't you, Cedar?" Smoke said.

Cedar nodded, and suddenly there was a strange lassitude, a dark, slack stillness on his face. His expression puzzled Smoke.

"Why did you do it, Cedar?"

Cedar's answer came finally through loose lips, "I thought a bullet might be faster, easier on you than a knife . . . I was a

fool when I tried it. Never was no good with a rifle. My knife allus gits my meat."

"You haven't told me why yet, Cedar."

"I didn't aim for you to ever have Emily."

"That's crazy thinking! What if every man . . . ?"

Cedar's loose lips twisted derisively, "I ain't every man, Brother Smoke! Some men wouldn't kill at all fer a woman . . . But I ain't ever' man, an' don't you forget it! I'm Nigger!"

"You're something else, too, Cedar," Smoke said coldly. "I'm going to tell you, and then I'm going to give you a chance to get out of this country. Right now, right after I tell you. Not tomorrow, or the next day, right now. . . . You aren't a Blackbird, Cedar! Soon the whole Cherokee Nation will know that you aren't my father's own offspring. When all the Cherokees find that out . . . even your fullblood cronies, they will go against you. You'll be a man alone, open to persecution from all sides."

"You can lie like Pap could," Cedar said. "Your lies don't scare me." He stared at Smoke's wounded arm, tight-faced, unblinking.

"I won't let you walk free around me after you've tried to kill me, Cedar. You know me well enough to know that."

Cedar's lassitude, his nonchalance, left him. "You wouldn't kill your own brother, Smoke."

"I'll kill any murderous stranger, though, that tries to kill me!"

Cedar's stare lost its depth and intensity. Callously, ruthlessly, Smoke went on with it, knowing that this was the only way he could strike into Cedar's contemptuous, cynical nature:

"You're a stranger to me, and you always have been! If I hadn't been misled into believing you were my half-brother, I would have killed you long before I went away to war! You always swore I had the best things, and because I was taught to feel sorry for you, I accepted what you swore as true. I know now that I was mistaken. I had to work hard for everything I got . . . clothes, and the food I ate, and the horses I rode; for the books I studied and the small portions of money I spent in town, and for expenses I had in the schools! You never had to work at all for your clothes and your horses and saddles, your guns and boots and ammunition and your fancy-beaded buckskin suits. You stayed free as the wind, because Dad figured he owed you all those things, figured that to ease his conscience, he had to pile everything at your feet! He bought books for you and pleaded with you to study, but you wouldn't have anything to do with them. You could have educated yourself and faced up to the responsibilities of life, but you didn't; and now you're going to have to, because Blackbird blood isn't in you! You'll have to promise to get out of this country for all time, or I'll shoot you down right now where you stand, like the slinking woods varmint you are! Do you get what I'm telling you, Cedar!"

"You ain't goin' to shoot me, Smoke."

Smoke stepped forward and rammed the gun into Cedar's mid-

dle and slapped him; hard, stinging blows with the front and back of his hand. Forced to do this left-handed, Smoke felt the throb of the bullet wound in the tender flesh above his wrist, but he kept at it, grimly.

Cedar shuffled back, his eyes bulging, revealing the first real fear Smoke had ever seen in him. Smoke pressed him, and watched that fear grow with his own growing insight. Always before, he had been reluctant to fight Cedar, and Cedar had sensed it. Now Smoke was crowding him relentlessly; he was a changed and terrible presence in front of Cedar, and Cedar did not know how to face up to him.

Cedar said at last, thickly, "I won't let you goad me into fightin', Smoke!"

"I'll goad you until you make a break," Smoke said. "Then I'll shoot you. I'll shove you off this bluff and leave you where the buzzards can pick your bones!"

"You ain't goin' to do it!" Cedar said violently. "I'll do anythin' you ask! Tell me what you mean, 'bout me not bein' no Blackbird!"

"You listen, then," Smoke said. "You listen good! I'm not going to tell it twice!"

With a savagery he dared not let dwindle in his voice, Smoke told the story as Fox Chuculate had told it, leaving out only the things Fox intended to speak in public. Cedar listened, and his face revealed conflicting emotions, then settled into lines of acceptance as Smoke stopped.

"I'll let you live on one condition, Cedar," Smoke finished after a brief pause. "And I'll do more for you than I have to. I'll sell half our property when I get it back, and send the money to you. But you've got to leave this country, right now, unarmed, without this gun. Is your horse near here?"

Cedar nodded.

"Start traveling then," Smoke said. "Or die!"

Cedar turned without hesitation, his long, reaching stride gaining swiftness with distance. He did not look back until he reached the wide patch of buckbrush, and then only for an instant. That instant was enough for Smoke. Cedar's great black eyes sent accusation at Smoke across the distance; the accusation of a kicked and beaten dog. Then Cedar faced ahead and was gone through the buckbrush. Later, Smoke heard the sound of Cedar's horse as it traveled unseen through the forest.

Smoke picked up Cedar's rifle and went back down the mountainside to the place where he had left his boots. He hurriedly put his boots on and rose again and started trailing his horse. The course of the horse's flight was clearly visible in scattered flint-rocks and broken bushes. The horse had gone straight down to the floor of the valley and slowed. Its shod tracks were distinct on patches of moss and soft, rotted leafmold. Those tracks moved in a circle; presently Smoke saw where tufts of grass had been nib-

bled. Stopping, Smoke whistled softly and waited, then whistled again. He heard the horse's uneasy, answering nicker, and went toward the sound, seeing the animal at last on an open stretch of limberwill grass. . . .

At sundown, feeling tired and drained emotionally, Smoke reined in at the cabin again and unsaddled and freed his horse. Entering the cabin later, he placed Cedar's rifle carefully on the old hickory forks above the front door, and had a momentary feeling as he left it there that the gun was his only remaining connection with Cedar. There was no doubt in Smoke that Cedar would leave the country for good. That certainty had come alive in Smoke with the first sight of Cedar's fear.

Bathing and bandaging his small wound, Smoke thought again wonderingly, It's a miracle I didn't get killed . . .

Smoke cooked and ate supper in the dusky darkness, then covered the fire in the chimney with ashes and undressed and prepared for sleep. Lying on the bed while full night darkened the window, he was aware of a sense of peace.

This day, he thought, he had accomplished something. There was a faint regret in him at the way he had been forced to handle Cedar; but as time went by, that regret would fade. Smoke had got Cedar to leave the Cherokee Nation, as Choate Blackbird had so desperately wanted.

That comforting thought was still with him as he drifted off into sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

SMOKE ROUSED before dawn, refreshed and still with a sense of well-being. He made his plans for the day before he got up and dressed, remembering all the while the advice Fox Chuculate had given him. It would be better, safer for him, to do his scouting in the woods on foot. A horse made too much sound; people could spot him, or trail him too easily. He would follow Fox's advice, and take his horse to the Mission pasture. He would apologize to Reverend Rogers for the rash things he had said, and the minister would accept the horse willingly.

Also, as Fox had so shrewdly stated, having a horse at Fairfield Mission would give Smoke an excuse for occasional visits with Emily.

Smoke's desire to see her again was alive in him later as he mounted and reined out to the familiar road.

Tendrils of fog rose up from the small creek branches and faded against the tree-tops, consumed by the rising sun. The hooves of Smoke's horse lifted a pleasant equestrian rattle on patches of scattered flint. Nearing the Mission, Smoke slowed and looked

happily at all the buildings, feeling the renewal of early morning intensifying in him with the sight of their staunchness and strength. He halted his horse completely at the forest's edge, drinking the picture in.

He was sitting his saddle that way, quiet and absorbed, when the rumble of hoofbeats sounded directly behind him. They were still far distant, on the road which Smoke had traveled from his cabin, but there was a loud and solid urgency about them that reminded Smoke of the sound of a cavalry charge.

Smoke wheeled his horse and sent it off the road and waited. When the sound of the hoofbeats strengthened, he dismounted and spoke softly to his horse as he stroked its soft muzzle, getting set to muffle any sound the horse might make when the riders passed him. They came into view faster than he had expected; an even dozen of them riding three abreast.

The three leading horses were richly groomed, their bridles and saddles gleaming with polished brass. That brass caught the rising sun and sent reaching flecks of light into the trees behind which Smoke was hidden.

Smoke recognized the three riders at once, and was vaguely astonished at the presence of two of them. Those three leaders were Murtch, and Fain and Gratton LeQuire!

Directly behind them rode Huck and Arch and Chain. Arch's broken arm was swathed in white bandages, strapped tightly against his chest; and even from this distance, Arch's face looked white and strained.

Behind those three . . . and Smoke's face went still and tight at sight of them . . . were six bareheaded, rawboned farmers, riding gaunt work horses bareback, and with heavy-reined black, blind bridles.

All twelve riders were armed, carrying rifles and pistols and shotguns. They swept thunderously past Smoke's place of concealment and turned into the Mission drive without slowing. They did not slow much until the front yard fence of the Rogers dwelling was almost against them. Then they fanned out and halted and came together slowly in a compact and formidable group.

Smoke saw the front door of the Rogers dwelling opening. Reverend Rogers, bareheaded and minus his long frock coat, stepped out to the edge of the porch. From this distance, Smoke did not hear the minister's greeting, though it was plain that Rogers was greeting the riders in his calm and patient way.

Grat LeQuire's voice, however, was like a rumbling bellow, reaching distinctly to Smoke:

"Seen anything of Smoke and Cedar Blackbird?"

Smoke watched Rogers shaking his head.

"They stay at that cabin, don't they?" Grat rumbled. "We searched it thirty minutes ago. Found a rifle above the door with C. B. carved on the stock. We're going to hang those two 'Birds for rape and murder!"

Smoke saw the minister's sagging attitude against one of the porch posts. It was a starkly visible sagging, as if the news had drained the minister of strength. Smoke started to curse, feeling a rampant urge to yell out and tell Rogers that Grat LeQuire was telling a brazen lie.

At that moment Emily Rogers came from the house and stood beside her father. Her black hair, glossy and loose about her shoulders, blew gently in the morning wind. The wind touched the hem of her long skirt, riffling it around her bare feet as she stood there tensely, placing a hand on her father's shoulder and listening while Grat talked.

Grat's talk had quietened. He had pulled off his high-crowned hat. To Smoke, Grat's words were indistinguishable. Beside Grat, Fain sat his saddle loosely, the upthrust butt of the gun against his hip looking dark and ugly. The rear of Fain's huge boots were down-tilted; their blunt tips barely touched the stirrups. Fain had removed his hat also, and his thick black hair, slicked down with grease, shone like polished ebony.

Smoke strained to hear Grat's talk, but it didn't reach him. It strung out for a long time, and then Grat turned and made a gesture to the group of farmers. One of them started talking in a coarse voice, but Smoke couldn't understand that either. Something the farmer had said, however, seemed to disturb Emily Rogers. She looked up at her father quickly, then turned slowly and re-entered the house.

Grat and Fain and Murtch wheeled their horses abruptly, gesturing to the others around them. All twelve of the riders, hitting three-abreast positions again, struck out on the Stilwell road.

Reverend Rogers still leaned against the porch post, watching them go. When Smoke mounted and rode out of the timber, the minister was still standing there; but his head was bowed now, and there seemed to be a great despondency upon him. He did not lift his head until Smoke was near the front yard gate.

Smoke reined in, watching the minister steadily. "Morning, Reverend," he said.

Rogers said tightly, "Where were you, when those riders stopped here?"

"Up yonder, in the woods. I heard what Grat said."

Rogers' face looked gray and sick. He said stonily, "Get out, Smoke."

"Reverend, you don't believe . . . ?"

"Get out! Get out before I drag you off that horse and beat you with my bare hands!"

Smoke sat still in the saddle. "I won't ride off, and let you believe what Grat LeQuire said. Don't you know he's lying, making up a story that will justify him or his men if they kill me?"

"That farmer didn't lie," Rogers said with disturbing softness. "I know grief on the face of a man when I see it! His home was raided about midnight. A bunch of Indians . . . you and Cedar

and a half dozen fullbloods! He heard Indians yelling your name, and Cedar's name, and the name of Fox Chuculate, too, while he was shooting at the bunch. He was outnumbered, overpowered. Cedar . . . the black one, he said . . . hit him over the head with a pistol, and then dragged his fourteen year old daughter off to the woods." Rogers choked. "Her brother was killed!"

"I don't believe it!" Smoke said. "I don't believe any of it!"

Rogers was staring at Smoke's bandaged arm. He said accusingly, "So you got wounded, last night in the fight?"

"No."

"I won't stand here and listen to your lies, Smoke! God help you when those farmers catch you! I've . . . prayed for you . . . thought there was goodness in you! I should have known, that night at your cabin . . ."

Smoke saw Emily coming through the doorway. The minister became aware of her presence, and his words broke off. He turned to her.

"Go back in the house, Emily!" he commanded.

She stopped just outside the doorway and stood looking at Smoke. Her face revealed no sign that she had heard her father. She asked on a long expellation of breath, "Smoke, is it true?"

"No. None of it's true, Emily. You have to believe me. I didn't take part in any such thing; and Cedar, he isn't even in this country now. I . . . sent him away, yesterday."

"You've been hurt . . . wounded," she said. It was a statement, devoid of accusation, of concern for him; devoid of anything save a lifelessness like death. "Where is Cedar? They found his gun at your house. Where is he? Did you hide him, so those men . . . ?"

Reverend grabbed her arm, turning her forcibly and pushing her back inside the house. He closed the door and stood with his hand on the knob, facing Smoke. "Go now," he said. "Go, or so help me God, I'll get a gun! I have the wrath of God behind me! I'll shoot!"

Smoke stared at the minister for a long moment, realizing that any quick explanation he made would be futile. Even if he told them the whole truth about Cedar shooting him, it would be useless. An explanation would take time, and an attentive, willing listener. Now, the minister wasn't going to give him time. Smoke turned his horse reluctantly and rode away from the Mission and out to the edge of the road.

He halted there, caught up in conflicting thoughts and emotions. He looked back at the Mission, and its buildings in the light of the sun were substantial and enduring, like a strong place of refuge from which Smoke had been forever exiled. A dove called softly through the silence, and that forlorn crooning, to Smoke, was like the call of death.

Murder, Grat LeQuire had said . . . and rape! Smoke's mind groped out, snatching at elusive tangents. Cedar on the mountain,

shooting at Smoke, trying to kill him. Cedar hadn't trailed Smoke there. Cedar had been there before Smoke, waiting and watching. Watching those settlers' homes in the valley, and perhaps planning last night's raid . . .

Had Cedar gone ahead with that raid, after promising Smoke he would leave the country? Had Cedar rejoined his fullblood companions and persuaded them to side him in a last act of violence before leaving? Had Cedar been the one who had yelled Smoke's name, and Fox's name, during the raid, just to implicate Smoke and Fox?

Smoke knew that he had to go see Fox Chuculate. The Indian had said he was leaving for Fort Smith late today, but Smoke had to find him before he left, and find out where he could locate fullbloods he could trust. Smoke thought with a sharp thrust of urgency, I have to contact local Cherokees who can help me track Cedar and those fullbloods he's leading, and stop them before they can raid again . . .

Smoke turned his mount into the woods and took the route a crow would fly toward Stilwell, thinking of the LeQuires and knowing that they had been heading for town also, to stir up more people against the Blackbirds. Outraged whites and mixed-bloods alike would soon be storming for Smoke's and Cedar's blood.

This route through the woods was rugged, trailless, but Smoke knew there was only one way to get into and out of Stilwell without putting his life in jeopardy. That way was to beat the LeQuires and those farmers there, and contact Fox and be gone again before they arrived in town. They had been traveling fast, Smoke knew, but they would stop at houses along the way to ask questions and spread the news of the raid.

Smoke kept his horse to a reaching lope, crossing the rugged defiles and the brush-choked crevices with a wary eye out for wet-weather seep holes and the burrows of groundhogs; for the sharp-stoned places where his mount could swiftly go lame on him. He decided to intersect the main road a mile from town, and stop long enough to inspect the earth for signs of the LeQuires' passing. He was, however, still a long way from the road.

All other caution except that intent inspection of his rugged route had left Smoke. So it was, riding fast through a dark, deep hollow, with his eyes fastened upon the terrain immediately in front of his horse, that Smoke almost came against Belle Ashley before he saw her.

He reined in sharply, and watched her do the same.

"Smoke! Lord, how you startled me!" she said.

"Morning, Belle," Smoke said. There was impatience in him; he had no time for any idle words with her. He didn't even ask why she was there, or where she was going. He thought he knew. He touched his hat courteously and started to rein around her.

"Smoke! What's wrong with you?" she demanded.

"I have to hurry on, Belle."

"Not that fast!" she said. "Smoke . . . wait! There's something I want to tell you! Something you need to know! I was going to your place to tell you! Smoke . . ."

He checked his horse and said with unrestrained coldness, "Make it fast, Belle! I'm listening!"

"Cedar has joined the LeQuires!"

"What?" Smoke said almost stridently.

She urged her horse close and said rapidly and convincingly, "He came to our house about nine o'clock last night. He wanted to see Mays. I . . . listened through a keyhole in my bedroom door while Mays talked to him. Cedar said he wasn't a Blackbird . . . that Fox Chuculate was his father. He said you had abandoned him, that he needed money, that he knew the country along Elk Creek better than anyone, and that he was ready to fight you."

Smoke absorbed it swiftly, aware of a fleeting and hurting shock. He stared at Belle, and recognized the truth that was in her at this moment; and at that same moment, all the confusion that had been in his mind was wiped out.

"Did Ashley go right to Fain and Grat with that news?" he queried.

"Yes. At least I suppose so. Mays left with Cedar, and was gone about long enough to have visited Fain and Grat. When he came back, Cedar wasn't with him. Mays said to me . . . and I'll never forget the look on his face when he said it: 'The Blackbirds are finished in this country, Belle!' I've been afraid something terrible would happen today. I . . ."

"It has already happened, Belle," Smoke said. "It happened last night."

Belle shifted, throwing a quick look around at the close-grown forest, then looking back at Smoke. "What has happened?"

"Murder," Smoke said. "A white settler's young son was killed. And Cedar dragged a fourteen-year-old girl off in the woods and attacked her."

"That's terrible, Smoke!"

"It's worse than that, but I know who instigated the thing. It was the LeQuires, and maybe your husband, Ashley."

"Smoke . . . are you sure of that?"

"It's the picture I get now," Smoke answered. "I met Cedar's fullblood Indian cronies yesterday. They're simple, backwoods Indians who might be gullible enough to follow almost any leader, up to a certain point. But I don't think any of them would have sided Cedar in the thing he did. I think most of those men in the raid were LeQuire gunmen, painted up and dressed like Indians. It was a move to smear the Blackbird name worse than it's already smeared. It was a thing to bring Fain and Grat out of isolation, so they could show the public a righteous rage, and a determination to kill us. Only, the LeQuires don't want Cedar. He is with them. They can use him, because he knows the reactions of full-

bloods, and maybe because they know he is in on some things I've planned."

"Was Cedar telling the truth, about Fox being his father? That's a strange thing to hear, after all these years."

"It's the truth, Belle. It's a twisted story, but I think it's true." He paused a moment, looking at her. "Thanks for telling me about Cedar, Belle. It means a lot to me, to know just what he's doing."

Belle looked at him steadily. "You can repay me by staying away from that girl at the Mission. It hurt me, Smoke, seeing you with her in town."

Smoke smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I don't think you'll have to worry about seeing us together again."

"Not ever?"

"I doubt it."

A faint constriction marred Belle's even tone. "You act strange. How much does she mean to you?"

Smoke did not answer. The urge to ride was crowding him.

Belle said tonelessly, "She could come to mean a lot to you . . . in time. Is that it?" When he still didn't answer, she urged her horse close; so close her slim leg touched Smoke's knee. "I won't let her ever mean anything to you, Smoke! Hear me? . . . I can ride when and where I choose now! Mays is scared to death to leave the house, but I told him I wouldn't stay penned in! He's scared to death, even of the LeQuires! He said he was going to Tahlequah tomorrow or next day. On business, he said, but I know he wants to get away from the stir caused by that raid last night. He said he might be gone several days." Her voice thickened. "I'm . . . coming to your cabin again, Smoke, maybe tomorrow night."

"I won't be there," Smoke said.

"Why not? When WILL you be there?"

"I don't know."

She said impatiently, "You don't know? Are you trying to avoid me, Smoke?"

"I've got things on my mind, Belle," Smoke said.

"Things more important than . . . than I am?" she asked.

Smoke's life had never run to deception. "Right now, yes," he said.

Belle ran a hand through her red-gold hair and watched him intently, appraisingly. Finally, with surprising warmth, she smiled. "Forgive me, Smoke. I know a man doesn't like to be pressed. It's just that I . . . well, I care so much!"

Smoke started to ride. "Thanks for the information, Belle."

"You're welcome . . . and remember, I'll be near the cabin the day after tomorrow night." She laughed softly, meaningfully. "I might have more news for you, and you certainly wouldn't want to miss that!"

Smoke shrugged in a way that could mean anything, or nothing, and sent his horse away from her, riding swiftly on through the hollow.

A brusque way to leave her, he thought as he rode, but there was nothing in him for her except the thanks he had sincerely spoken. Nothing else, now, at all.

The delay had decided him against pulling out to the main road to check for fresh, fast-traveling horse tracks that would let him know whether or not the LeQuire riders had beat him to town. Smoke stayed on a direct route through the timber, and sighted Stilwell at last from the crest of a rocky rise.

Chapter Fourteen

THE TOWN looked serene, devoid of traffic except for a few farm rigs pulling in early to church. The quiet lethargy of a pleasant Sunday morning rested almost like a visible thing on the streets. A quiet little town, Smoke thought, with violence in the hills beginning to tighten around it.

That violence might fill its streets, he thought, if the LeQuires and their henchmen reached town before he left.

He neared the road leading down the slope, and saw three ramshackle wagons pulling in from the direction of Evansville. Behind the wagons came a long, lank fellow on a jog-trotting mule. An idea came to Smoke, and he sent his horse at a faster clip, putting the idea into effect at once. He wouldn't be noticed so much, he thought, if he sided those wagons into town. He might be passed off as a farmer on horseback, riding quietly into town to church.

He thought of the heavy gun on his hip, and smiled wryly. No farmer would openly carry a gun like that to church.

Then, coming alongside the first wagon, Smoke recognized the people on it. He smiled and pulled close against it, knowing that his problem was solved. He leaned around, peering into the shadow of the wagon's canvas top. His voice held a lift of humor.

"Howdy, Frank . . . Mary! How are things across the Arkansas line?"

Frank Boyd and his wife stared at Smoke. Their dejected expressions faded. Mary said happily, "Smoke Blackbird!"

"It was like Emily Rogers told us, Smoke," Frank said. "We're a defeated people. Things are no better, anywhere we went. We came back to tough things out."

Smoke looked back toward the other wagons. "I see the Walkers and Crabtrees came home, too."

Boyd nodded, and Mary said with the age-old fortitude of a woman, "We'll camp on the edge of town, Smoke. I believe Frank and the other men can pick up odd jobs enough to keep us going here. Don't you?"

"Sure," Smoke said, and wondered if the word held enough con-

viction. He said: "Who's the lank old fellow, the one on the mule?"

Frank shrugged. "He drifted in to our camp one night. He's so old his joints squeak, but he swears he raided with Quantrill."

Smoke turned in the saddle and looked intently at the old man on the mule. Something about the man's appearance had struck a familiar chord in Smoke at first sight of him, and now Smoke recognized him . . . Lem Schuster was the garrulous old raider who had once told Smoke: "You're a spotted he-cat with your whiskers singed, and your heart crying blood of the Yankees!"

"I know him, Frank," Smoke said, "but I hope he doesn't spot me. He'd talk my leg off, but I haven't any time for that. You can tell him I want to see him, later."

Boyd smiled. "He's a talker, all right, but it keeps us from brooding too much."

"That's right. Nobody broods much around Lem."

Smoke rode quietly, close against the covered wagon, letting its shadow dim his face. The entrance to Main Street was close now, and Smoke knew that one or more of LeQuire's many hirelings could be hidden behind upstairs windows, watching the approach of every man who entered town. Smoke's entrance with the wagons might go comparatively unnoticed, he thought; but now he had accomplished his purpose. He had reached town without being challenged, and he would no longer impose his presence upon the Boyds. He would take no chances on endangering the lives of innocent people.

He said without turning in his saddle, "Drive straight through, Frank, without stopping on Main Street. There may be trouble. Later, I might be able to contact you folks." He slowed his horse, dropping back slightly as the wagons turned into Main Street. Then, swerving his horse to the left, he rode swiftly through a narrow alley, struck a cross street and turned again along it until he reached another alley leading up behind Gilbey's Restaurant.

Smoke dismounted near the restaurant's sagging rear door and left his horse standing with reins still looped across its neck. He stood a moment with the smell of refuse strong in his nostrils, and listened to the sound of the three wagons. They were moving steadily along Main Street, their wheels throwing out an audible clacking and grating.

Decisively, Smoke opened the rear door of the restaurant without knocking, and went in.

He had barely drawn one foot across the threshold when he felt something touch his leg lightly; and the next instant, standing frozen with astonishment, Smoke heard pots and pans rattling against the floor all around him. It was enough noise, he thought, to rouse the dead.

No man, Smoke knew, could have stepped into this dimness and avoided the homemade burglar alarm. As the noise subsided around him, he reached out carefully and felt other taut strands

of twine. The trap was impregnable, he thought, and felt like a fool. The silence after the clamor was absolute; so absolute that Smoke had the feeling that it held the whole town in its grip.

He stood straight and still, listening intently, and was certain of it. The whole town was still with a deathly stillness. Even the rumbling and grating of those three wagons had stopped.

And their stopping, Smoke knew, meant that he was close to a trap much more formidable than these pots and pans. Frank Boyd wouldn't have stopped on Main Street of his own accord. Somebody had stopped Frank.

Sally Chuculate's voice reached at Smoke out of the shadows: "Gilbey! You crazy man! You still drunk?"

"I'm Smoke Blackbird, Sally," Smoke said. "I'm looking for Fox."

The Indian woman materialized soundlessly and stood staring at Smoke. "Fox gone," she said. "Him go far 'way, down to Fort Town, 'cross big river." She grinned. "Fox say, fix pan trap, be safe!"

"He told me he wouldn't leave until late today."

The Indian woman was deftly lifting strands of twine, breaking them and unthreading the handles of tin cooking ware. "Fox get wise to tricks of LeQuires and that Ashley man," she whispered. "He find out they aim to kill him! . . . quick! . . . cut throat . . . shoot! . . . so he say he must go." She dropped the twine and motioned Smoke forward. "LeQuire men, they watch this place all time! How you get here?"

Smoke's voice was brittle. "I guess they let me come in, Sally. I guess I'm trapped." He drew his gun and moved past her, his fast stride carrying him toward the front. He was aware that the Indian woman was following him. She was close behind him as he stopped and looked out through the restaurant's windows, and saw the wagons drawn up in the center of the street.

Frank and Mary Boyd stood halfway between their wagon and the front of the restaurant. They were holding the hands of their two small, sleepy-eyed children. Behind the Boyds, menacing them with drawn guns, were two men.

The larger of those two men faced the front of the restaurant and yelled: "You're blocked in there, Blackbird! If you try to get back to your horse, you'll be shot! We want you out of there, but don't try anything, either way you move! You wouldn't want your friends here to get slugs in the back, would you?"

Smoke stood watching them through the window without answering.

"Even the two kids here, Blackbird!" the man warned in a challenging and stentorian voice. "They'll get it, too, if you try to shoot your way out! Leave your gun in there, and come out peaceably with your hands up! We won't do anything except hold you until Grat and Fain get here! And we'll let these folks you come into town with go on!"

Smoke turned to the Indian woman. "Sally, did Fox ever tell you exactly where Cedar and those fullblood Cherokees stay?"

She waved a hand inclusively. "They stay 'way yonder, in woods."

Smoke fought against his growing weight of frustration and futility. He said urgently, "Sally, whenever you see Fox, tell him to keep pushing the fight he has started. No matter what happens to me, you tell him to do that."

"I tell him good!"

"Tell him Cedar has double-crossed us. Cedar has joined the LeQuire outfit."

Sally Chuculate nodded, and Smoke handed his gun to her. "I can't let them hurt that family out there. I'll have to give myself up. Keep this gun, and if you get a chance, see that my horse is taken to Fairfield Mission."

She nodded again. Smoke saw the knowledge of his own desperate plight mirrored plainly in her sloe-black eyes. He turned from her and reached to open the door.

Frank Boyd's call suddenly caught him there and held him.

"Don't give in, Smoke!" Boyd yelled hoarsely. "These men won't hurt us! They're bluffing! If you can't shoot your way out, stay there! They can't come in and take you, not without . . ."

Smoke saw the lift and fall of the gun in the hand of the smaller of the two men. Boyd's voice choked off as the gun struck against his head. He stretched out in the street, knocked cold. Mary cried out brokenly and knelt beside him. One of the children was sobbing.

Smoke opened the door and stepped outside with lifted hands.

He paused at the edge of the sidewalk, holding his hands shoulder high, letting them see that his scabbard was empty. Then, dropping his hands, he walked straight to Frank Boyd's prostrate form and stooped and started to lift him.

The man who had struck Frank suddenly cursed and rammed his gun against Smoke's side. "Don't touch him, mister!" the man said. "If you do, there'll be two of you down! And you'll STAY down, after I've pulled this trigger."

There was no mistaking the man's murderous intent. Smoke straightened and saw Sally Chuculate hurrying out of the restaurant, shaking her head warningly to him. Sally knelt without speaking and lifted Frank's slack body. Mutely, still shaking violently, Mary Boyd helped the Indian woman carry her husband through the doorway of the restaurant.

Smoke looked along the wagons, seeing Hosie Walker and Lige Crabtree sitting frozen on the springseats. Beyond them, sitting his mule in the center of the street, was old Lem Schuster.

The old raider looked at Smoke for an instant, straight and intently, then rose in his stirrups and gave voice to a rebel yell.

"Go bring that old coot up here, Grimes!" the man behind Smoke said.

Old Lem sat straight on his mule as the man approached him. A dead, waiting silence clamped down on the street. The man stopped in front of Lem's mule, holding his pistol leveled, and said something. Calmly, almost unconcernedly, Lem spat at the tips of the man's dusty boots. The man looked down instinctively, and that was when the old raider acted. A mule-whip snaked out from his hand, flicking across the wrist of the man's gun-arm. The man dropped the gun and yelled and squatted, crazed with pain. Savagely, Lem Schuster beat the man on down to the dirt with the mule whip. It was over quickly, and Lem was wheeling his mule away, racing out of sight between two buildings.

The man Lem had whipped got up weakly and wobbled over to the edge of the sidewalk and sat down.

That commotion had barely subsided when Smoke heard the clatter of approaching hoofbeats and turned slightly to see the LeQuire bunch entering town.

They struck Main Street at full gallop, still riding three abreast. Grat, Fain and Murtch were still in the lead; Arch, Huck and Chain pressed close behind. When the dust settled down with their slowing, Smoke saw that their strength had dwindled. Those farmers were no longer with them.

Grat and Fain recognized Smoke at the same instant. They pulled in awkwardly, their smooth, heavy faces flushed with triumph.

"So-ho!" Grat said in his reaching bellow. "It's the hawk of that 'Bird outfit! We're fixing to hang you, Smoke!"

Smoke's powder-burned visage twisted. He said sardonically, "Do a neat job, Gratton! Don't botch it, the way you botched that raid!"

Perhaps neither Grat nor Fain had expected to see much fear in Smoke, but neither had they expected this. Smoke's words reversed their thoughts and hurled their triumph back into them. Never had they been fast men, either in mind or body. Now, for one brief instant, they seemed drained of both thought and action.

Fain recovered first. "We'll march him on foot, Grat, clear up to Ashley's. Ashley needs to be in on this."

Smoke said goadingly, "Ashley's rotten, Fain, like you and Grat, but he's the sharp one. He has sense enough to quit, before my friends ambush him or cut his throat. You LeQuires, though, you'll keep hiding behind your gunmen until the light of justice searches you out like the torch in the hand of a frog hunter! Then you'll both be stuck like frogs!"

It was strange, Smoke thought, but it was always this way with weak men . . . Huge men with muscles bulging on their thighs started to stamp the life out of a small, weak spider, and the spider rose up suddenly on spindly legs and darted at them, and the men instinctively flinched . . . The picture was in Smoke's mind, and

fragments of it showed in the faces of the LeQuires, and those visible fragments made Smoke push it.

"You're frogs on the bank of a stinking millpond," he said, "hiding behind gunmen thin as grass! But the spears of loyal Blackbird followers have been whetted sharp for many long moons, waiting until the season for killing intruders! You LeQuires will die, maybe harder than your brother Rance died!"

Grat cursed and nudged his big horse forward. He lifted his right hand, motioning to the man behind Smoke. Knowing what the gesture meant, Smoke dropped down and slightly sideward, hoping to lessen the blow of the gun against his head.

There was, however, more than one blow. They thudded soddenly out of a swirling gray pool of sickness; so many that Smoke lost count . . .

Chapter Fifteen

HIS HEAD was down in the gray muck of that sickness, and there was a leaden weight across his stomach, mashing the life out of him. Something was shaking him violently, shaking his whole body, and when he opened his eyes he felt that the earth was upside down.

He heard the clatter of hoofbeats all around him, and saw the flint-covered earth sliding under his face. He knew what that pressure was on his stomach then. He was draped over the saddle of a jog-trotting horse, and a rough hemp rope bound his hands and feet, with the rope cinched under the horse's belly.

He turned his glance slightly, fighting against the swimming in his head, and saw the faint outline of the brand of the horse's right shoulder. He was tied across the saddle of his own horse.

That knowledge had barely penetrated Smoke's senses when Grat's voice issued a blunt command and Smoke's horse was halted. Smoke felt rough hands untying the rope that bound him; those same hands hauled Smoke across the saddle and planted him on his feet. His feet and legs tingled with numbness, and the whole universe spun about him, but he leaned against his horse and did not fall.

He felt himself pushed forward, and iron-clamped hands gripped his arms on either side. His boots struck soddenly against a flagstone walk and the bulk of a white house loomed before him. Clear thought started easing through his senses; he lifted his boots and climbed the stoop of a wide veranda, and those rough hands hurled him through the door and into the house.

He heard a startled voice, and recognized it as that of Mays Ashley:

"Grat! Fain! What do you mean, bursting in here? Why did you bring him here?"

Fain LeQuire said bluntly, "You've dodged too much, Ashley. You're in, as deep as we are! You're going to take part in this here hanging!"

"Hanging? Good God, if you kill Smoke Blackbird, none of us can stay here! Every Southern Cherokee in this country will be after us! A whole Army won't be able to stop them!"

Grat said harshly, "Stop that whining! You think I'm going to let this 'Bird go now, after all the trouble I've gone to, capturing him? Your damned idea of having him clear out of this country was a fancy dream, Ashley, but it didn't work! We're going to kill him . . . and in a rougher way than he killed Rance!"

Smoke stood in the close-packed group of men and watched Mays Ashley. Smoke was sick, and his head was throbbing violently, but he could think clearly, and he knew that Ashley's fear and reluctance comprised his only hope.

Ashley said pleadingly, "That . . . that thing about Rance is one of the things I mean, Grat! He always boasted that nobody could lay him low . . . that he knew how to read the minds of Indians. But Rance was found tied on a horse, murdered! And think of the way Cedar's fullbloods pulled away from him yesterday! Cedar thought he knew Indians, too . . . God knows he ought to! . . . but he didn't! Cedar couldn't talk them into making that raid with him!"

Smoke straightened, feeling new strength surging through him on the heels of Ashley's words. Those fullbloods hadn't taken part in last night's raid! Smoke's plea to them yesterday had grown in their minds and strengthened their pride as being brave and fair warriors, unwilling to stoop to the things Cedar had planned.

Smoke said scathingly, "Grat and Fain can always furnish their gunmen with paint, Ashley! No Cherokee will ever side them in a hoax like they pulled last night, but maybe paint will fool those farmers!"

Ashley reached back and caught to a chair and sat down weakly. "See there, Grat," he whispered. "Smoke knows things. Maybe everything! And how did he come to know them? Don't you see what I mean?"

"Hell no!" Grat bellowed. "If he knows so much, that makes a stronger reason why we should wipe him out! Cut out your blabbering!"

"But HOW did he know?" Ashley cried. "You hid Cedar away! He didn't have any chance to tell Smoke! HOW does Smoke know things?"

Smoke crossed his arms and faced them with a cool dignity. "For a Blackbird," he said quietly, "the rocks and the hills and the trees and things have voices! And those voices speak also to loyal Indians who have always fought for the Blackbirds. This is your answer to HOW I know things!"

"Them fullbloods told you," Fain growled. "They told you everything, after they split with Cedar."

Ashley said stridently, "Those fullbloods of Cedar's were miles away near the Illinois River! I doubt if they know Cedar went through with the raid, even 'til yet! They couldn't have told Smoke about anyone being painted!"

It was Arch, the squat gunman, who spoke next. "Hills and trees don't speak to a dead man, Ashley! Not even to an Indian dead man! Not even to a dead Blackbird!"

Grat LeQuire laughed with a dribbled slowness and slapped Arch on the back. "That's a good thought, Arch! The best one!"

Ashley stood up and said violently, "It's a stupid thought, Grat, and you know it! If Smoke knows things, all the Indians who are backing him know, too! What is going to happen to our plans here . . . our fees from incoming settlers, and our pull with Cherokee officials . . . when those settlers on Blackbird Farm are told that they've been lured here to be pillaged by the very men who sold them their rights?"

Grat laughed again. "If we turn Smoke loose, *he* can tell those farmers. I don't get your reasoning, Mays!"

"Smoke can be forced to leave here!" Ashley said. "Whip him, beat him, make him promise to leave and never come back here! . . . I offered to pay him to leave once, and he refused to do so, but maybe a beating will change his mind!"

"We slugged him down to the dirt in town, Mays," Grat said. "Look at him now. Has he weakened?"

Ashley sank into the chair again. "You listen close, Grat, and you, Fain," he said softly. "The Cherokees are still a divided Nation. We have pull with the party in power. There won't be a general uprising against the party in power, unless that party is tied up with rape and murder. We can smooth over that thing last night, if we take things easy and leave the fullbloods around here alone. But if you kill Smoke Blackbird, full-scale war will start here! There'll be more sympathy for Southern Cherokees! The party in power may be ousted, and where will that leave us?"

Smoke watched Grat turn to look at Fain. For a long moment, they stared at each other, mulling over what Ashley had said.

"As long as we have pull with the party, and that party stays in power," Ashley pressed, "Smoke can't even talk his followers into attacking us openly. They've been through a war, and many of them were guerillas who are now banished to the hills, and they know the power of the victors! But if Smoke Blackbird is murdered, and public sentiment changes, those Indian guerillas will swarm us! We can't hire enough gunmen, nor pay enough crooked officials, to protect us then!"

Smoke heard a slight, hacking cough, and turned slightly to look at the gunman called Murtch. Murtch was looking at Smoke steadily. Murtch's face, in the dimness of the room, looked pale. As Smoke's intent gaze touched him, he shifted and licked his lips.

"It's a thought, Grat," Murtch said uneasily. "I've heard a lot here, about the old power of the Blackbird name."

Grat wheeled to face Murtch. "Yeah? Just what you propose to do with this 'Bird?" Grat waited, but Murtch didn't press his point.

"Murtch," Arch said abruptly, "will you let me tell you what to say?"

Murtch nodded, still licking his dry lips.

Arch pivoted, thrusting his face at Smoke. "Here's my plans for this 'Bird, Grat!" he said, rubbing his arm in its sling. "Let's clip his wings! Let's fix him where he can't ever hold a gun again! Let's beat him 'til he pukes up bile and faints, and then send him out of here tied to the back of his horse . . . the way we found Rance!"

Smoke watched Grat and Fain and knew that Arch's evil plan was taking root in their minds, filling their senses with a growing and avid pleasure. Grat had always been the slower of the two; it was Fain who voiced their decision.

"All right!" he said. "All right! Get him moving! Get him on his horse, and tie his boots under the horse's belly. Leave his hands free! I want him to try to shove off the poker I'm going to hit him with! I want to see him keep lifting his arms up, while I smash him to pieces!"

"Don't . . . don't do it here!" Ashley pleaded.

"What'n 'th hell's wrong with here?" Fain gritted, rolling it out almost like one word. "Isn't this what you wanted, Ashley?"

"Not . . . not here!"

"By God!" Fain snarled, "you'll stand on the porch and watch it! You hear that!"

"No!"

"You'll watch it," Fain repeated. "Go get me your fire poker now!"

Ashley got up reluctantly and pushed through the group. Smoke felt Huck and Chain tighten the pressure on his arms. They shoved him, but didn't release him; they held him and stayed close on either side of him as they forced him through the doorway. At the door, Smoke tried to spin out of their grasp; he heaved violently around, making a staggering, three-man huddle, but it was useless. Weakened from the beating he had taken in town, Smoke would have been no match for either one of them. He subsided, feeling the blood pounding against his temples, and walked on out with them and let them lift him onto his horse.

Grat stood holding the reins of Smoke's horse as Huck and Chain tied Smoke's feet under the horse's belly. Huck and Chain had pulled off Smoke's boots. They heaved on the rope, and it cut into the flesh above Smoke's ankles, but he acknowledged the pain with a barely-perceptible flicker of his eyes, knowing that the cut of the rope was a small thing compared to the thing that was to come.

That thing was the long, hook-ended poker, which Fain LeQuire

was holding now as he stepped down off the porch. Smoke's glance touched the fire poker and shunted away from it and struck against Mays Ashley, who stood in a cringing stance just outside the door.

And there was a thing that got across to Smoke in this moment, in spite of his knowledge of Ashley's greedy, conniving nature. Mays Ashley was bad, but he was an educated man, and some portion of sensitivity had rubbed off on him in the process of absorbing education from books. Ashley had imagination. He knew what that poker was going to do to Smoke.

Fain halted. "Check those reins, and that bridle, Grat," he said. "I don't want something breaking. I don't want his horse to run."

Grat smiled. "I've got this horse. How you aiming to do it, Fain?"

"Like this!"

Fain took a quick step forward, lifting the poker with both hands. Smoke went loose in the saddle, expecting a blow across his back, but it didn't come. Fain hooked the poker behind the collar of Smoke's shirt and heaved downward. The poker ripped Smoke's shirt wide open, and cut a gash in Smoke's back from shoulder to hip.

A man could not bear such pain without flinching. Smoke flinched and leaned forward over the horn of his saddle, clenching his teeth.

"That's just a taste of the iron that's going to brand you for life!" Fain said. "You ain't likely to be nosing around for trouble here, after I get through with you!"

Smoke unclenched his teeth and rolled spittle on his tongue and spat into Fain LeQuire's face.

Fain stepped back, cursing, then lunged forward again and struck Smoke across the chest. The muscles of Smoke's shoulders caught part of the blow, but it jarred him and numbed him, and sent stabbing darts of pain down through his chest.

"Not too high, Fain!" Grat warned his brother. "Dammit, you're liable to hit his head and knock him out cold! We don't want that! Take your time, man, take your time!"

Fain ran his tongue out between his lips and stood watching the restless shifting of Smoke's horse. The horse was trying to turn its head to look back at Smoke in the saddle, but Grat LeQuire held it with both hands snugged close against the shanks of the bit.

Fain would take his arms next, Smoke thought, and he fought down a monstrous panic, visualizing just how it was going to be. Until this moment of stark desperation, Smoke's groping mind had found not the faintest glimmer of hope. Now a faint hope built in him with the thought of his knife in the left front pocket of his trousers, and he acted on the thought at once.

"Don't take my gun arm, Fain," he said. "A man needs . . ."

"You're weakening!" Fain snarled, and slashed twice with the poker across Smoke's right arm.

Smoke leaned to the left, feeling his right arm go dead and lifeless. Then he felt the dynamite blast of pain and had to fight to keep his senses. The pain consumed his arm and sent great snaking coils of fire through his chest. He made a retching sound that was not feigned at all, but he was still conscious; and he saw now that every man was on his right side, watching Fain.

Smoke leaned far to the left, drawing his left arm up against his body, as if in a desperate effort to protect it. He heard Fain and Grat both laughing; and as their laughter rose, Smoke pushed his left hand down into the front pocket of his trousers, feeling for his Barlow knife.

Fain hit him again just as he caught the knife and pulled it free of his pocket. It was a low blow against Smoke's right side, intended to straighten him up. Smoke straightened, concealing the knife in the palm of his hand and slamming that hand to his lips.

Perhaps, to those watching, it was the gesture of a man trying to hold in an outcry. They laughed again, but their laughter seemed to come to Smoke from a long way off. Every fibre of his being, pain-wracked as he was, was struggling to put in force this thing he had so desperately planned. His teeth clamped the blade of the knife while his face was turned sideward away from the of his shoulders. Smoke went far forward, his left hand outstraightened up. He saw the poker in Fain's hands coming at him again, and he ducked forward, taking the blow across the back of his shoulders. Smoke went far forward, his left hand outstretched along the mane of his horse.

Smoke's knife was sharp, and when he ran the blade under the crown of the bridle, it severed the leather neatly, throat-latch and all.

Grat LeQuire, holding a steady pull on the bridle, staggered back as the bit came free of the horse's mouth. Grat went all the way back, down to the earth on his buttocks.

Smoke's left hand drew the knife back with down-striking suddenness, gouging his horse in the flanks. The horse squealed in protest and leaped over Grat, carrying Smoke away at a dead run.

Fain LeQuire was cursing savagely, but his slow wits made him the last one, except Grat, to free his gun. Arch was shooting erratically with the only hand he had, and Huck and Chain had been blasting at Smoke almost from the time Smoke's horse reared and started.

There was too much pain in Smoke already for him to know when the first bullet struck him. He didn't look back, and his horse kept running, and he didn't realize he had been hit at all until he saw the blood.

There was lots of it, running redly down the front of his tattered shirt and spilling over the sagging looseness of his empty cartridge belt. He started to lift his right arm to feel, wondering if he had been hit in the neck. When his right arm failed to obey the command of his brain, he felt around his neck with his left

hand and then held the hand out before his face. It was only then that he realized he had dropped his old Barlow.

There wasn't much blood on his hand; just a smear on the tips of his fingers. He hadn't been hit in the neck; maybe high in the right shoulder, he thought. He tottered sideward, and tried to straighten up, but he could not. Shock was blotting out his senses, and his horse was still running, and that was all Smoke knew . . .

Chapter Sixteen

HE STRUGGLED up out of a vast obsidian gulf and saw a ball of gray cotton-wool, light but monstrous, floating above his face. The ball jiggled incessantly, and moved against his face and away from it; and that ball, every thin and web-like thread of it, dripped sickness.

It was a kind of sickness a man couldn't fight against, because reason would not stay with him long enough to allow him to make a conscious fight. Always, he struggled up out of the void and saw that ball floating, and it always looked light, but it was heavy with sickness; and once it was sucked back into the muzzle of a huge cannon, and came shooting out at him again on a puff of black powder, and it exploded against his eyes and became the face of Fain LeQuire.

That was when Smoke Blackbird groped out to the shores of reason, and heard his own voice cursing, and felt firm hands pushing him back down to a sweat-cold pillow. His eyes were wide open, and for the first time, he saw faces . . . faces other than the face of Fain LeQuire.

The first face he recognized was Emily's. The other was Reverend Rogers. He let his body go lax and lay there staring at them, and he knew he could speak to them because he had heard his own voice cursing.

"Where am I? What place is this?"

"You're here at the church house," Reverend Rogers answered. "You're here at the Mission Church."

Memory surged through Smoke's brain, lifting him violently against their hands. "Where's my horse, my gun? I want my gun, Reverend!"

"You rest now, Smoke. You're better."

Smoke fought off their hands and sat up with his head touching that ball of gray sickness. "Where is Fain? What did he do with that poker?" he asked, and he thought to himself, I'm talking like someone crazy. He fell back, heaving nothing from the depth of a hot, empty stomach, and their faces pulled away from him when he dropped down into that void . . .

Cool wind touched his face, and he opened his eyes with a strange lassitude upon him. I want to rest this way forever, he thought. There was no pain in him, but only a steady and exquisite throbbing, and that throbbing was his own pulse-beat, catching its stride after the fever.

"Smoke?"

He turned his head on the pillow and saw Emily sitting in a chair near an open window. She started to rise, but she made a picture there.

"No," Smoke said. "Don't move."

She smiled. "All right. You look comfortable . . . Smoke, you're going to get well? Do you know that?"

"Sure. What are you doing? Knitting?"

"Yes." She smiled again. "You've given me plenty of time for knitting, this past week."

He said in astonishment, "Week? How long have I been here?"

"Fourteen days," she said, "counting today."

He stared at her. "Fourteen days!"

She nodded quietly. "They almost killed you, Smoke."

Smoke tried to move his right arm, and found that it was in splints, bound against his body. "My shoulder?" he asked. "Is that where I was shot?"

"Yes. Your right shoulder, and once across your lower ribs."

Smoke thought of the blood that had oozed across his gunbelt, and of the violent, heavy thud of the poker against his body. His rage was like a vast fire under cover, consuming everything in him except hatred for the LeQuires.

"How soon can I leave here, Emily?"

"As soon as you're well."

"How long will that take?"

"I'm not sure. Father might tell you. He'll be here soon."

"Have the LeQuires ever come here, looking for me?"

"Once, the next morning after the old man brought you here."

Smoke looked at her, puzzled. "Old man? What old man?"

"He told us his name was Lem Schuster," Emily answered. "He didn't exactly bring you here. He said your horse hardly stopped running at all until it got here. He followed you, riding his mule. He said he recognized you, there in town, right after LeQuire men hit Frank Boyd with a gun. He said he knew he couldn't help you then, because there were four or five men, and two of them in the door of the restaurant with shotguns. He left the wagons and hid on the edge of town, and he saw the LeQuires bring you out of town tied across your horse. He followed, he said, but he had to be very careful to keep from being seen; and he was hidden in the trees near a large white house when the LeQuires brought you out and put you on your horse and started beating you." Emily paused, and her eyes looked luminous in the light from the open window. "The old man said he was drawing a bead on the man who was beating you, when your horse broke away from the

bunch . . . Smoke, were they actually beating you with an iron rod?"

Smoke said through white lips, "An iron poker. That's what broke my arm." He paused, watching Emily face outside quickly, as if she were resolutely turning her back on the thought. "What kept the LeQuires from finding me here, Emily? Didn't they make a search?"

"Yes. They searched every building, turned everything upside down, even here in the church. But the old man . . . Lem . . . he had stayed up all night, watching the Stilwell road. He saw the LeQuires coming, early that morning, and he hurried down here and carried you out to a patch of mullein and sourdock, far out behind the barn. Lem and Father had already hidden your horse and saddle in a hollow at the south end of our pasture. The LeQuires haven't been back since. We've been very careful, keeping you here in the church building, and Lem has stood guard over the Mission almost day and night, watching for LeQuire riders."

Emily stopped talking, and Smoke waited a moment, watching her. He said at last: "Your father was hard against me, that morning right after the raid. It's a wonder he didn't hand me over to the LeQuires again."

"My father believes in justice, Smoke, but he isn't brutal. He . . . we did what any Christian people would have done when we saw what kind of condition you were in."

"I didn't have anything to do with that raid, Emily."

Emily rose at once and came near his bedside. "Don't talk any more, Smoke. You're weak. You need to gain some strength."

"I didn't have anything to do with that raid! If you'll listen, I'll tell you . . ."

"Hush, Smoke," she said, and turned away from him, calling over her shoulder, "I'll be back later, and feed you some soup."

Smoke lifted himself slightly and watched her walking down an aisle between the pews. The interior of the church looked vast, the way it had looked a long time ago when he was a youngster. He was on a cot, and the cot was close to the minister's rostrum. Smoke lay back, turning his head on the pillow and looking about him. On the wall behind the rostrum was the picture of a Cross, and under the Cross Smoke saw the lettering: IF WE WALK WITH CHRIST IN THE SUNSHINE, HE WILL WALK WITH US IN THE SHADOWS.

Smoke looked up at the high ceiling of the church, thinking of shadows . . . Shadows on a man's mind, and hatred . . . Shadows of dark men riding, and shadows in the woods where a young girl had been attacked. It wasn't strange at all that Smoke should suddenly remember words which Emily had once spoken to him: "If you don't stop this violent way you're traveling, Smoke, all your life, you'll be riding under the shadow of Quantrill's flag!"

She was still weighted down, Smoke thought, with the burden of misunderstanding. She did not understand that a man could never stop fighting men like the LeQuires. And she thought Smoke had made that raid.

Smoke thought of the old guerilla raider, Lem Schuster, and knew with a feeling of hope that the old man could help him organize men to carry the fight to the LeQuires. A man couldn't take what Smoke had taken, and then keep hiding in the woods, waiting for action to start in Cherokee Councils. Ruthlessness, brutality such as that possessed by the LeQuires had to be eradicated, wiped from the face of the earth.

When Emily returned, carrying a cloth-covered bowl, Reverend Rogers was with her.

The minister touched Smoke's forehead without speaking, then lifted Smoke's head and bunched the pillow and laid him back gently.

Emily, on the other side of the cot, said quietly. "We've had a bad time, Smoke, trying to feed you. Here. Try this."

Smoke let her feed him the soup, making it as easy for her as possible. The soup was a succulent, life-giving substance, settling in him and sending out tendrils of strength. Smoke finished it and said feelingly, "Thanks," and watched Emily rise and stand looking at him.

Reverend Rogers said: "Lem Schuster wants to talk to you."

"Send him in," Smoke said. "I want to talk to him, too."

Rogers hesitated. "He's up in the woods, guarding the Stilwell road. Before I go bring him here, I'd like to ask you a question. Do you intend to organize some of your Indian friends, and start raiding again?"

Smoke said distinctly, "I've never raided here yet, Reverend. If I can, I'll organize men to fight the LeQuires, but I won't attack innocent settlers. Ashley and the LeQuires sponsored that raid a few nights ago. Cedar switched to their side because I tried to force him to leave this country. I guess Cedar led LeQuire's gunmen. It MIGHT have been Cedar who attacked that girl." Smoke told them the story about Cedar, and watched the uncertainty and doubt growing on their faces. "Fox Chuculate is carrying my fight to the Councils," Smoke finished. "But after what Fain and Grat did to me, I don't intend to wait. Do you blame me, Reverend?"

Rogers paced the floor quietly, his hands locked behind him. Emily stood looking down at Smoke while the silence stretched out.

At last Rogers stopped his pacing. "It's against my code to sanction violence. And whether I blame you or not is beside the point. If the story you've just told us is true, perhaps I wouldn't blame you. I can't forget, though, that an honest farmer . . . a man who is obviously not given to violence . . . swore that he heard your name called during the raid. The explanation

you give for that seems thin to me . . . and the whole story about Cedar seems far-fetched, like something you yourself might have thought up in a last-ditch effort to wipe the taint from your father's record. As one loyal to his father, you can't honestly be blamed for trying to shield his name. However, until I've been much in prayer, and been given more insight, I can't support you in an effort to fight the LeQuires; and there's one thing certain: I shan't allow you and that old man to discuss plans for violence here in this church. I shan't allow the House of the Lord to be used for any such discussion."

"Then you'd better keep Lem Schuster out of here," Smoke said. "Tell him we'll discuss plans at my cabin, as soon as I'm able to be moved. How long do you think that will be?"

"Perhaps a week."

"All right. And thanks, Reverend . . . for everything."

Reverend Rogers nodded and looked intently at Emily, but she stayed by the cot, looking at Smoke. At last the minister turned and left them there, and Smoke said at once:

"Do you believe me, Emily? Do you still think I took part in that raid?"

She said uncertainly, "I want to believe you, Smoke."

Smoke said firmly, "I want you to believe me, Emily."

She smiled sadly. "I'm wondering why. Why is it so important to you that I believe you? You'll go your way, regardless of what I think."

"Hasn't your thinking changed any at all, Emily?"

"Not where raiding and killing is concerned," she said. She ran her fingers nervously around the edges of the empty soup bowl. "That old man who followed you here . . . he terrifies me with his talk of Quantrill . . . of the pillaging those raiders did, of the burning and killing! I . . . can't forget that you rode with them, Smoke! Only yesterday, that terrible old man . . . he called you a leopard! He asked: 'How is The Leopard this morning?' "

"Lem has to talk, Emily. Don't pay any attention to him."

"But . . . a leopard? Smoke, is that funny to you?"

"No," Smoke said. "No, it was never funny to me. It kept reminding me of my burned face, and I never liked that."

Emily reached down impulsively and touched Smoke's cheek. "I . . . don't mean anything like that," she said unsteadily. "Your face isn't repulsive to me. It wasn't, the first time I saw you, but I sensed, by the way you looked at me, that you thought it was. But The Leopard, those words speak to me of vicious things . . . things that creep in the forests, bent on violence."

"You can't stand the thought of violence, can you, Emily? You've always been sheltered by the Church, shielded from things ugly and violent. You've never been taught that there's another side of life, where men must fight and kill unscrupulous, brutal enemies."

Emily looked at him strangely without speaking.

"That's what I meant once," Smoke went on, "when I said I sanctioned your beliefs . . . but with reservations."

She shook her head. "You won't ever sanction anything I believe, Smoke, even with reservations. That's why I'm wondering why you care whether I believe you or not. Why is my belief in you so important?"

Smoke looked at her, and thought that there might never be another time to tell her. "It's important because I love you, Emily," he said.

He watched the change on her face, and he could not read that changing. It wasn't a commingling of happiness and sadness, as he might well have expected from a girl who had once told him plainly that there could never be anything between them except friendship. It was more like fear, or a visible fight against temptation, but it was not wholly those things, either. Smoke could not understand it, and he was glad when it left her.

She smiled. "I've heard it said many times that most men fall in love with girls who nurse them through sickness. When the sickness passes, the love is gone."

"My love won't be, Emily."

She clutched the bowl tightly and turned to go.

"Emily!"

She turned back to him reluctantly, as if his call had come from far off, as if it would take too much effort to answer.

"I need to know, Emily," Smoke said. "Right now, here in this church, I want to hear you say whether you care or not, or if you might ever learn to care."

Planes of light through the church window framed her clearly: a dark, full-bodied girl with strong feeling alive in her, standing poised before him as if her thoughts were much more powerful than anything she might say.

"Love and hatred can't walk hand in hand, Smoke. How can a man whose heart holds so much hatred possibly speak of love?"

"There'll be a time soon when I can forget about hatred, Emily. There'll never be a time when I can forget about you!"

Her dark face tilted slightly, as if something he had said had puzzled her and she wanted to hear it repeated.

"You . . . you speak with such desperation," she said.

"You told me once I was a desperate man, remember?"

She didn't answer. Wind through the open window touched her hair, and the light framed her small, full shoulders. Her continued silence roused turmoil in his mind, touching him strongly with its gravity. Then, setting the empty bowl on the window sill, she turned and came to the cot and sat down beside him. Her closeness warmed him and soothed his senses; it was a closeness that was all around him, like warmth of a winter's fire.

"I could love you, Smoke," she said. "But it would be the kind

of love a woman might have for an incorrigible outlaw. A forbidden love . . . at least for me. Something I can't touch."

He said tensely, "You're speaking from the viewpoint of the Church now, Emily."

"A Christian viewpoint is the only one I know."

He said with conviction, "I can change, Emily. I can be the kind of man you want, in time."

"When you've killed the LeQuires, and Mays Ashley perhaps, and a dozen or so of their gunmen?"

Smoke stared at her, infinitely disturbed. "What do you expect me to do? Slink out of this country like a beaten cur, and leave them to gobble up everything I have?"

"No," she said, and stood up. "I don't even hope that you'll try to avoid them, either, while your problem is being worked out the legal way. I . . . did hope that you'd do that . . . once. That day, after the fight in town, after the trip we made together back here to the Mission, I had the feeling that you were going to live quietly, patiently, and wait. That hope was a weakness in me. I might have known that the first time you glimpsed any of the LeQuire riders in these hills, your hatred would come up, and you'd follow and tackle them, the way you did this time. Rashly, angrily, thinking because you're a Blackbird you're invulnerable, you waded into them and almost got yourself killed." Tears did not mar the even spread of her dark lashes, but the sting of them was there, welling behind her eyes. "Oh, Smoke, can't you realize that as long as you live, you'll have your portion of enemies! Don't you realize what it would do to a woman to want to raise her children up in the warmth of Christian living, and be burdened by a husband whose temper and will for violence always made him revert to the law of the gun?"

Smoke stirred restlessly and said with a touch of anger, "You're jumping at conclusions, Emily, in everything you say! I didn't jump the LeQuires this time. They jumped me!"

He watched her turn away from him and pick up the empty soup bowl, and he knew for a certainty that she wasn't listening; that she would never listen to him. She had never been caught in the sharp fangs of violence. Hers had been a life steeped in humbleness and prayer and spiritual strength, and she did not understand him.

"Emily," he said, and watched her pause and stand attentively, "I don't intend to cause you or your father any more inconvenience. I may be jeopardizing this institution and endangering your lives. Tell your father to send Lem Schuster here right away. If your father will loan us a wagon tonight, I want to move back to the cabin."

"You can't do that, Smoke! You aren't well enough to be moved yet!"

"I'm the one to judge about that. I'm going to move, tonight! Do what I'm asking, Emily."

Her darkening glance held a long time upon him. Then she said, so low he barely heard her, "All right, Smoke, if you insist."

He looked straight up at the ceiling of the church and tried to shut the sound of her receding footfalls out of his hearing. He tried to shut her out of his mind and concentrate on a plan of action; and beeause his hatred of the LeQuires was so strong in him, he succeeded with an act of will.

He would hide, he thought, in or near the cabin; and he would put Lem Schuster to work on scouting trips, to search out and organize Indians. Lem could slip into Stilwell and get Smoke's gun from Sally, and perhaps persuade Frank Boyd and the Walkers and Crabtrees to join Smoke. Inside of a month, Smoke thought, he would have strength enough, and backing enough, to brace the LeQuires and all their gunmen.

Chapter Seventeen

AND LIFE, Smoke Blackbird thought, still held some conpensations. Less than two weeks later, his plans were bearing fruit.

Lem Schuster, with the ingenuity of a man who had spent all his life in the open, had scraped and cleaned and dug out a cave for Smoke on a thickly timbered hill above the cabin. Smoke made this cave his home, while his wounds healed and his strength returned, and some of the stiffness left his right arm.

Immediately after getting Smoke established in the hidden cave, old Schuster had slipped into Stilwell under cover of darkness, and had got Smoke's gun from Sally Chuculate. That same night, Schuster had visited Frank Boyd's camp on the edge of town, and had persuaded the Boyds, Walkers and Crabtrees to aid Smoke in his fight. The Boyds had moved into Smoke's cabin, and the Walkers and Crabtrees had driven out and camped near Fairfield Mission.

After that, day after day, old Schuster had scouted in the hills, contacting and getting pledges of support from Indians. Smoke had warned the old man to keep a constant lookout for Cedar; but no Indians knew Cedar's whereabouts, and at last Smoke figured with relief that Cedar had left the country.

There was a time of peace in the hills, with no signs that the LeQuires or their gunmen were riding. Either Mays Ashley had converted the LeQuires to his way of thinking, Smoke thought, or the LeQuires figured the beating they had given Smoke had quelled his desire to fight.

Smoke was up and around by the middle of the second week, taking short walks away from the cave, and keeping close surveillance over the cabin below his hide-out. Frank Boyd, with an outward show of planning a permanent residence, stayed out-

side from daylight till dark, straightening fences and cutting sprouts, and patching the sagging old house and barn.

At the end of the week, Smoke felt strong enough to ride, and could draw and squeeze the trigger of his gun without too much effort. That night, when Lem came in, Smoke sent the old man to the Mission to bring back his horse and gear.

"I have to find out if I can stay on a horse any length of time, Lem. Tomorrow, I want to ride with you to the mouth of Elk Creek, and have a personal talk with the Indians you've been organizing."

Smoke sat on a flat rock in front of the cave after the old raider had gone, thankful for and yet marveling at Schuster's loyalty and friendship. That first night when Schuster had hauled him away from the Mission, Smoke had warned the old man that he never wanted to hear any talk about Quantrill.

"Raiding with Quantrill is an episode I want to forget," Smoke had said firmly. "I'm glad to have you with me, Lem, and I'm thankful for whatever quirk of fate sent you here, but talk about Quantrill is out."

Old Lem had laughed softly and stroked his stiff gray beard. "'Tweren't no quirk of fate that sent me here to the Cherokee country, Smoke. Half the men that rode with Quantrill will be here soon, to keep out of the hands of the law!"

Smoke sat in the darkness now and thought of the quietness that had gripped the hills for the past weeks; and he wondered at that quietness and had a feeling that it was temporary, like the breathless, waiting stillness before a storm.

This was strange, Smoke thought, for at no other time during his convalescence had he felt this way. Perhaps, he thought, it was because he knew the time was growing close when he would lead armed men in an open, relentless fight against the LeQuires.

It was a clear night here on the mountain, but far away beyond the Illinois River, sheet-lightning spread against the skyline like flashes from hidden cannon. The wind carried the smell of woodsmoke from Frank Boyd's dwindling brush fires, and the first faint chirring of cicadas drifted pleasantly across the dark.

Smoke stood up, restless and ill-at-ease; and when he heard the sounds of approaching footsteps, he knew they weren't made by Lem. He touched the butt of his gun, remembering that Frank Boyd had already brought his supper. What reason would Frank have to come to the cave again? But it was Frank, coming hurriedly close in the starlight.

"Smoke," Frank said at once, "there's a woman at the house wants to see you."

Smoke absorbed it calmly. "Mrs. Belle Ashley, I'd say."

Frank rubbed his jaw. "You knew she was coming?"

"No," Smoke said, "I didn't know it. I guessed it. Did you tell her I'm here?"

"Hellfire, no, man! I'm not that ignorant! But she says she has

to see you. She kept pleading with us. We told her we didn't know anything about you, but she acts desperate. I left her with Mary, and pretended I had to leave the house to see about my horses. What . . . ?"

"Send her up here, Frank," Smoke said.

Frank hesitated. "You think it's safe to let anyone else know you're here in the hills?"

"In a day or so," Smoke said, "everyone in this country will know. Besides, Belle may be able to tell me some things I need to know."

Frank stood a moment looking at Smoke, then said softly, "I see. You're going to use her. Everything's fair in war. Smoke, sometimes your determination scares me. I hope . . ."

Smoke said bluntly, "Send her on up here, Frank."

Frank Boyd turned aburptly and vanished through the screen of brush.

Smoke went to the mouth of the cave and stood there waiting and listening to the night sounds. The wind in the trees was a pulsebeat, coursing through the close heat of the late-spring darkness and speaking of a restless strength. Some of that wilderness strength and restlessness, perhaps the same kind of restlessness that surged through a leopard after too long a time of resting, was in Smoke Blackbird. It strengthened when he saw Belle push through the brush and pause in the starlight facing him.

"Smoke?" she said.

"It's all right, Belle," he answered.

She rushed against him without hesitation, breathing hard from the climb. She held him with her arms locked tightly around his body above his gunbelt, her head resting against his shoulder. Her passion was wanton, demanding; he felt her teeth biting the point of his shoulder lightly through his shirt.

"It's been so long," she whispered. She released her tight hold on him and her face lifted. "Almost too long, Smoke!"

Smoke said, without too much self-condemnation in him, "I've been patient, Belle."

Her voice was soft, exultant, "You've missed me, Smoke!"

It was more than half question, eager, challenging, but Smoke let it pass without answering. He held her, his left arm resting lightly over her shoulder, his right touching the small of her back. She was a woman, and they were alone in the darkness, and there was strength in him like the pulse-beat of wind through heat. He kissed her, and he thought, these are the lips of a strange woman . . . but none of it mattered.

Nothing mattered any more except to beat the LeQuires; to beat them and overpower them and their gunmen; to fetter them and banish them from this land that had been given by treaty to the Cherokees. Or to kill them, if necessary; and killing them might be best.

Belle was a strange woman, and she was in his arms, but it

didn't matter, because he could use her to keep him posted on the activities of his enemies. It didn't matter, because he could never have Emily anyhow. He was branded in Emily's sight as incorrigible; a man walking on forever under the shadow of Quantrill's flag.

Belle was speaking. "I meant, it's been so long, I'm almost too late to warn you."

"Warn me about what?"

"You don't suspect anything at all, Smoke?" she queried. "Hasn't anyone brought you the Advocate?"

He smiled, but it was a surface thing, quickly stilled by the tingling of warning within him. "They don't distribute newspapers this far out in the beau-jacks, Belle."

"Smoke, you're going to get the farm back! You're going to win your case in the courts!"

A bat dipped close through the starlight, wobbling like a featherless arrow, and the wind from its flight struck his face. "You brought good tidings then, Belle," he said. "What's this about needing to warn me?"

She said chidingly, "Smoke, you simpleton! Do you think the LeQuires are going to give up—" she snapped her fingers—"just like that?"

"It's still good tidings, Belle. Without the support of the court, the LeQuires—and your husband—are stripped of their power. I can evict them, legally, even if I have to use force."

"You can't raise force enough to evict them, Smoke. I know." She waited a moment, watching his face. "Mays told me all about that beating Fain gave you. A day or two after that, Mays persuaded the LeQuires to let fighting rest. He persuaded them that you were through, that you would give up, and they didn't keep riders out in the old way, constantly on guard for you on every lonely trail and side road. The LeQuires stayed close to their home, keeping their gunmen handy, but waiting. And then, this morning, Fox Chuculate's story came out in the Advocate, and along with his story was a complete history of the LeQuire family —names, dates, all sorts of proof that their claims to land here are null and void. Such proof, such a spread in the Advocate, is bound to make you win; but it won't stop the LeQuires from fighting."

"I'm not sure I'd even want them to throw up their hands and quit," Smoke said.

"You want them to fight, don't you, Smoke? So you can hurt them?"

"They hurt me."

"Yes." She drew a long breath. "But the next time they'll take your life. And they intend to kill every Cherokee who tries to side you. The LeQuires called together every man who has ever been affiliated with them, today, at our house, and they're going to force every man to ride with them until you're found."

"Don't tell me they're going to force Ashley to start combing these hills with them?"

She nodded. "I said every man, didn't I? Smoke, the LeQuires and my husband know they're finished here, as far as owning property is concerned, and Mays wants to get out, but the LeQuires won't let him. They're bent on murdering you now. They're bent on causing a reign of terror . . . and if you try to block them, that reign of terror will come!"

"I'll block them before it starts." Smoke caught her arms, making her look straight at him. "Belle, have you heard anything concerning Cedar?"

"Certainly. He stays with Fain and Grat. Mays said Cedar drinks, almost constantly. He will help the LeQuires trap you, Smoke." Belle freed her arms, then ran her hands past his sides and caught him and pulled herself against him. "I left my buggy a little way up the road from the cabin. My clothes and personal things are on it, and I have five thousand dollars of my husband's money. Come with me, Smoke. We can be miles across the line in Arkansas before morning."

Smoke said curtly, "You expect me to leave now, right when the Cherokee Supreme Court is going to hand Blackbird Farm back to me?"

"You can stay out of this country, out of danger, until that decision is final and the LeQuires are evicted or arrested by Cherokee officials. It might take a long time for officials to act . . . but five thousand dollars will last us a long time, Smoke."

"You're leaving Ashley for good?"

"Why not? You never thought I'd stay with him for long, did you, Smoke?"

He answered with a cool reserve, "I never thought much about it, Belle, after the first few days."

"What?" she said, and her voice was soft, dangerous. "What did you say?"

He had watched her come to him through the starlight, and a wild, primitive yearning had caught him because she was a beautiful woman and he had known they were going to be alone. And because the old guerilla streak had taken the forefront, deep inside his mind had been the thought that he could play along with her and use her to keep him posted on the moves of those who would destroy him. But now she had told him everything he needed to know; the chips were down, and he looked at her and knew that there was nothing else in her for him.

She moved against him again, and he stepped back slightly and felt the pressure of the rocks across his shoulder. He remembered Reverend Rogers' warning: 'She'll steal your soul,' but somehow, memory of those words did not carry as much weight with Smoke as the knowledge that Belle had stolen money from a man whom she'd deceived.

It didn't matter to Smoke that Ashley was his enemy. Belle

had known Ashley's selfish, conniving nature before she married him; and in marrying him, she had spoken vows which no honest woman would have spoken. And that, Smoke knew, was because Belle was selfish and conniving, too. Even this trip she had made to see Smoke tonight, had been sponsored by selfish motives. The news she had brought was a lure she held to make him indebted to her. He felt this strongly, and looked at her and knew she repelled him. He pushed her back.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, and she made no effort to fill her voice with the old intriguing softness. "Haven't I put myself out for you, tried my best to help you? What do you think you're doing, pushing me that way?"

"You've put yourself out, all right, Belle, for selfish reasons."

"Well!" she said indignantly. "If this isn't a pretty come off! Where did you get your holier than thou attitude? From that delicate little part-Indian slut at the Mission?"

"Belle!"

"Oh, I'm not the little angel you used to dream about, Smoke! You used to put me up on a pedestal, and I let you, but I knew some day I'd show you my claws! You used to frustrate me, because I knew you had the capacity for roughness, and you'd never show that roughness to me! Not until that night down there in your cabin. What about that night, Smoke?"

"It's over and done with, like everything else between us, Belle. Thanks for the news you brought me, but you'd better go now."

"No! You're coming with me!"

Smoke turned away from her suddenly, his senses tuned to the far-off sounds in the night. "You'd better go, Belle. I think I heard gunshots."

She said tensely, "Where?"

"On the Stilwell road, back toward the Mission. Are you sure no one saw you leave home tonight?"

"I'm not sure." She listened, and when the echoes of gunsound reached her, she wrung her hands. "God, no, I'm not certain! Smoke-. . ."

"Start traveling, Belle. Pull off the road if you hear riders."

She wheeled and left him without saying good-bye, and that in itself was conclusive proof of her self-centered nature. A strange woman, Smoke Blackbird thought, sensuous, wilful, tricky, no good for any man.

Her footfalls faded, and the night close at hand was soundless. Smoke stood alone, thinking of those gunshots. Had old Lem bumped into some of the LeQuire outfit near the Mission?

Premonitions of bad trouble filled Smoke's mind with its insidious warning. Something had happened to Lem, and here Smoke was, horseless. Frustration mounted in Smoke. I'll go down and get one of Frank's, he thought.

He was pushing his way through the dark undergrowth when the sound of fast hoofbeats reached him. He stood still, listening.

A lone horse, he thought, and it was coming along the road from the direction of the Mission. It stopped at the cabin, and Smoke knew the rider was not Lem Schuster. Lem would have come on to the cave. Smoke pushed on.

He stopped again when the cabin came in sight, and saw Frank Boyd standing limned in the lighted doorway. To the left of the doorway, indistinct in the shadows outside, stood a man holding the reins of a saddled horse.

Frank Boyd and the man were talking, their voices making a suppressed murmuring that shut off as Smoke approached. Smoke stopped, looking at the man in the shadows, and recognized the tall, lean shape of Reverend Rogers.

"What was that shooting about, Reverend?" Smoke asked. "Has something happened to Lem?"

"No." The minister's voice was strained, unsteady. "I brought your horse, Smoke. Lem wouldn't come back here. He stayed with Fox, and they said they'd follow the LeQuires, at least long enough to be sure which direction the bunch would take."

"What happened?"

"Emily . . ." Reverend Rogers said, and then stopped; and even in this dimness his eyes became great dark pools of despondency. "Cedar lured Emily out of the house, and the LeQuire outfit grabbed her!"

"No!" Smoke said, and the word kept echoing inside his mind as the shock lunged through him. "He couldn't. Cedar wouldn't do a thing like that!"

Chapter Eighteen

"IT'S A MOVE to trap you, Smoke." The minister's voice sounded faint, desperate. "Fox Chuculate said the LeQuires had hit on a fast way to draw you out of hiding. He said they knew you'd trail them and make an effort to free Emily."

"When did Fox get back from Fort Smith?"

"He was just riding in, I think, and he stopped by the Mission to ask about you. I was telling him about the LeQuires beating you, when Lem came after your horse. I introduced Fox and Lem, and we were sitting on the front porch talking when Cedar walked around the side of the house.

"He didn't startle me too much. He used to do that, just walk up out of nowhere, when he and your father lived here. He wasn't armed. I didn't even see a knife on him. He looked kind of weak, or desperate or something, like a man who has been on a prolonged drunk. He said he'd like to talk to Emily, alone, around in our back yard.

"I hesitated at first, but then I remembered how it was with

Cedar, how he cared for Emily. I didn't think he'd harm her. He said he'd wait for her, around there on the bench; and I went in and sent Emily out to him.

"I had barely joined Fox and Lem again on the front porch, when I heard Emily make a sound . . . a kind of struggling sound, like someone had placed a hand over her mouth. I ran around there, but I was too late. Cedar was carrying Emily, running out toward the pasture."

Smoke had already taken the reins from the minister's hands and mounted, but Rogers kept talking, as though moved by a profound urge to get it said.

"The LeQuires and a bunch of their gunmen had cut the pasture fence and ridden up behind the house. It was dark, but I heard Grat call out to Cedar, and I recognized him. I yelled at Cedar, but he didn't stop. Fox and Lem had followed me around the house, and Fox started yelling at Cedar, too. But Cedar had already reached his horse, I guess. Anyway, the whole bunch started shooting at us, and I heard a window break in the house, and bullets hitting the wall. I guess Fox and Lem might have done some shooting, if they hadn't thought of Emily. Cedar and the LeQuires took her away. Smoke, what are we going to do?"

"We'll follow them," Smoke said. "Frank, get your horse, and one for the Reverend. Bring your rifle and pistol, and all the shells you have. I'll ride on, and get Walker and Crabtree to join us. We'll need every man we can get."

"Lem told me to have you contact some Indians," Rogers said.

"No time," Smoke said crisply. He reined around, but the minister's uneasy voice stopped him.

"Smoke . . . about Emily. Do you think . . . ?"

"She's in the hands of a bunch of cut-throats," Smoke said. "I suppose it is a move to draw me into a trap, but with a bunch like that, anything can happen. Keep that in mind, Reverend, and don't be squeamish about carrying your gun! I'll wait at the Mission. And don't lose any time!"

Smoke nudged his horse and turned it, and felt its muscles bunching under the saddle as he loosened the reins. The night wind touched Smoke's face with a swifter push, and the familiar feel of the saddle between his knees alleviated some of his tension.

He wondered as he rode if he had been too blunt in giving Reverend Rogers his opinion of Emily's predicament. Already, the minister had been laboring under a terrible strain. But it had never been Smoke's way to try to cover reality with soothing words; and this brazen move of the LeQuires was stark reality.

For the first time in their lives, Smoke thought, Reverend Rogers and Emily had been snapped up in the ruthless fangs of violence; and it was going to take the kind of violence they had so sorely detested to get Emily free.

Emily's abduction, Smoke knew, was a swift, unscrupulous move to lead him into a trap. He might avoid that trap by waiting.

Being a minister's daughter, Emily might be released after a few days. But what would days and nights with those ruffians do to her? The thought was intolerable, eating into Smoke's mind like a blight.

He slowed his horse as he neared the Mission, seeing the glow of firelight through the trees ahead. This was the camp of the Walkers and Crabtrees, Smoke thought, and reined in toward the fire and halted. Lige Crabtree and Hosie Walker came from the shadows of the parked wagons, both carrying their rifles. They recognized Smoke and motioned him forward.

Smoke said without greeting, "You fellows get ready to ride."

Walker and Crabtree exchanged glances, then turned to look at their families standing huddled near the wagons. Smoke read their thoughts.

"Tell your women and children to go stay in the church," he said. "I don't know how long we'll be gone. This isn't going to be a quick ride just to free Emily Rogers. Right now, her welfare is the most important thing, but I won't stop after she's free. This is a showdown, and if either of you have any doubts about sticking, say so now."

Crabtree said bluntly, "We'll stick."

"Good," Smoke said. "I won't shove any man in front of me. I'll do everything in my power to spare men with families. But there'll be dead men in this country, maybe before morning, and they won't all be LeQuire men."

Walker said uneasily, "That bunch took straight to the woods. If they keep traveling that fast until midnight, they'll be plumb down to Tenkiller Ferry. How we going to trail them in the dark?"

Smoke said with conviction, "I can trail that many horses blindfolded, through heavy undergrowth. Get your horses. We'll ride as soon as Boyd and the Reverend get here."

Smoke's decisive manner seemed to give them courage. Turning to the wagons, they pulled out worn old high-backed saddles and hurried off to their picketed horses. They came back mounted, and rode close to the wagons for a quiet talk with their families. They joined Smoke then, and waited while the sound of hoofbeats from the direction of Frank Boyd's cabin drew closer. Frank and the minister rode up, and Rogers said quietly, "It'll take me a minute to get my gun, Smoke," and reined on down to the Mission. Smoke and the others followed and waited at the front yard gate.

The minister was coming out across the porch, carrying a shotgun, when Smoke heard the night-hawk's cry, shrill and too quickly repeated. The familiar ring of it held him stilled in his saddle. "That's Lem," he said softly. They all waited.

Lem Schuster materialized on foot through the starlight. He paused briefly near the corner of the house, then picked Smoke out and came forward.

"This'll have to be a foot-sloggin' patrol, Smoke," Lem said. "Horses'll just advertise our presence. That outfit ain't travelin' far."

"How do you know that, Lem?"

"Feller by name of Ashley told me an' Fox."

"Ashley?"

"Yeah. We found him out there in the woods. He said Fain LeQuire shot him in the stomach with a Derringer. He said he told the LeQuires he wasn't havin' anything more to do with this business. He tried to break away from the bunch, and Fain shot him. Ashley's dyin'."

"Where's Fox?"

"He's out there with Ashley. Funny thing about that Fox. Said it ain't fitten' a-tall for a educated man to die out in the brush, alone. Some kind of warped sympathy, if you ask me. You know a place near here called Alder Holler? Old log shack there, Ashley said, where Rance LeQuire used to do his batchin'."

Smoke dismounted. "I know the place, Lem."

"That's where that bunch aim to hole up," Lem said. "Ashley told me an' Fox that the LeQuires figured you'd make a play against them there sometime tomorrow."

"They've misjudged badly, Lem," Smoke said. "We'll hit them along about midnight . . . fast and hard!"

Smoke led his horse inside the Mission corral, motioning for the others to do likewise. They all left their mounts saddled, tied inside along the fence.

"You might get to talk to Ashley if we hurry," Lem said.

Smoke nodded and led out across the pasture, striking the wide swath of trampled grass where the LeQuires and their henchmen had traveled. The trail skirted a sumac thicket, angling across a cleared ridge, then dipped sharply, crossing a sandy wash.

"Yonder," Lem said, and pointed.

Smoke saw Fox Chuculate rise from a kneeling position beside a dark figure at the bottom of the wash. Fox stood motionless as Smoke went forward, then offered his hand as Smoke stopped. They shook hands, and Smoke's companions formed a silent, watchful circle around them. Smoke looked down at Mays Ashley.

Ashley was lying on his right side, his knees drawn up against his stomach. His breathing made a loud sound, rough and erratic and bubbling through lips that emitted blood. His eyes were wide open, throwing his dimmed sight across the gray sand and the patches of bunchgrass.

"Ashley," Smoke said, and knelt, running a lean hand under the wounded man's head.

Ashley's eyes rolled upward. He said with surprising clarity, "Blackbird?"

"Yes."

"Fain shot me," Ashley whispered. "I tried to break away from

them after they took that girl . . . after I saw how they were going to treat her."

Smoke said thickly, "How were they treating her, Ashley?"

Ashley retched, and his mouth gaped open, and Smoke felt the warm sticky wetness of blood spilling against his wrist. "It was Grat," Ashley said. "Grat promised Cedar that no harm would come to her, that Cedar could hold her on his horse until we got to Rance's old cabin. After that, Grat said, she would be locked in, unharmed. But Grat wouldn't let Cedar keep her, not even this far. Fain helped Grat pull her off Cedar's horse and . . . and Grat forced her down in front of him on his own horse. They had talked Cedar into giving them his knife and gun before he went after the girl, and they wouldn't give his weapons back to him. He couldn't do anything. The girl fought Grat until she was too weak to fight, but Grat, he . . . he forced her to straddle the saddle in front of him, and he stayed in the saddle too! I couldn't stand to see the way he was handling her! My God, I wish I'd never got tied up with Grat and Fain! I'm dying, and I don't want . . ."

Smoke became aware that Reverend Rogers was kneeling on the other side of Ashley, but it was too late now for any comforting words, even if the minister had intended to speak them. Ashley was dead.

Smoke withdrew his hand and wiped it deeply across the sandy earth, cleansing it of blood. He stood up, and there was a violent churning under his breastbone, and all he could see in his mind was Emily, being forced brutally down into the saddle in front of Grat LeQuire.

The bitter, galling impact of that vision caused Smoke to stand for a moment over Ashley's body, looking not at the body, but at the quiet-faced circle of men around him. He felt impelled to speak.

"This thing was allowed to happen because of my own procrastination. When I first came back to this country, Frank told me news that made me know I'd have to kill Grat and Fain LeQuire. I listened to that news, and I was a sure man, and I intended to brace them and kill them. It was a straightforward course I planned—the right thing, too, because a man can't go wrong when he stamps out oppression and cruelty—but somehow I got sidetracked. I . . ."

"My daughter threw you off your course, didn't she, Smoke?" Reverend Rogers said. He stepped forward, confronting Smoke. "And everything I've taught her, all through her life, upheld her convictions. I came from a country of law and order years ago, and I married a part-Cherokee woman on the eastern edge of Indian Territory when times were peaceful. I know now that a man must adjust his thinking to conditions under which he lives. I preached meekness, humbleness, even during the violence of the War years, but I was wrong. I should have preached the power

of prayer, and taught my followers to pray for strength to fight their enemies, to chase out evil-doers even as Christ chased the money-changers out of the Temple. The LeQuires have violated all the laws of God and man, and here in this country now, there is no law except the law of a man's own weapons." He lifted his shotgun suggestively. "I now hold one of those weapons, and I feel no condemnation when I say I intend to use it, not in vengeance, God forbid, but to rescue and protect my own flesh and blood, knowing that unless I'm willing to use it, I'm less than a man!"

Garrulous old Lem Schuster stepped past Smoke and offered his hand to the minister. "By Ned, Reverend!" he said happily, "we ought to do some good fightin' after that sermon! If we had time to round up some of our Cherokee friends, we'd blast all them LeQuires plumb off the map!"

Smoke said abruptly, "It's better this way, Lem. Just the seven of us, taking care of a personal issue. The LeQuires won't be expecting trouble until morning. Surprise will be on our side. And this way, whatever happens, Southern Cherokees can't be accused of starting an uprising. Keep single file now, and move fast."

"One moment, Smoke," Reverend Rogers said. "There's another thing I feel I ought to tell you, right now, before . . . well, we don't know just what may happen . . . Emily has been despondent all this week, and today she told me she had to go see you tomorrow. She said she loves you, Smoke, and that she had to follow the man she loves on whatever course he chooses. She made that decision without my support. Right or wrong, she said, she loves you, and to her it was the most important thing in the world."

"Thanks, Reverend," Smoke said.

He wheeled, crossing the wash and leading his companions into the first dark stretch of timber. The trail of the LeQuires was easily followed. They had traveled in a compact group, their horses tearing abandonedly through the undergrowth. Smoke led on steadily until the pitch of the land and the intensifying darkness warned him that he was entering the mouth of Alder Hollow. He stopped then and waited until his followers gathered around him.

"We'll split up now," Smoke said. "We aren't far from Rance's old cabin. Frank, you take Walker and Crabtree and the Reverend and move up on the right side of this hollow. When you see firelight or hear men moving or talking, spread out and keep under cover. I'll take Fox and Lem. We'll move up behind the cabin. We might get a chance to get Emily out of there before any shooting starts."

Frank said uncertainly, "Looks to me like you're trying to face all the trouble, Smoke."

Smoke said firmly, "Those are my orders, Frank. Start moving, and don't any of you do any talking."

Frank turned reluctantly and led Crabtree, Walker and the minister off through the woods out of sight. Smoke waited a moment, pleased at their soundless progress, then turned to the left, motioning for Fox and Lem to follow. They angled up the side of the hollow, and Smoke lengthened his stride as the undergrowth diminished, leading Fox and Lem swiftly on through the trees.

The LeQuires had a big fire going in front of the cabin. Smoke saw the bright orange flare of it when he was still more than two hundred yards away, and he slowed, signaling Fox and Lem to silence. They pressed close to him, so close he could hear their breathing.

Lem whispered softly, "They're crazy, Smoke! Look at that outfit! We can shoot 'em like sittin' ducks!"

Smoke said warningly, "You remember that Emily is down there, Lem." He turned slightly and looked at Fox, suddenly struck by the Indian's continued silence. "Fox, do you feel all right?"

Fox shrugged and smiled. "I feel about as happy as an old darky I used to know, back in the Old Nation. He used to get on a happy jag, and when he did he was always singing—GOIN' TO TOWN IN MAH LI'L RED WAGGIN—ONE WHEEL OFF AN' TH' AXLE DRAGGIN'."

Smoke looked at the Indian intently, feeling the weight of a strange premonition. He reached out impulsively and gripped Fox's hand, and said softly, "You'll do, Chief Sly Fox! Thanks for that trip you made, and for everything."

Fox shrugged again, and then said quietly, "Do we make any efforts to spare Cedar tonight?"

Smoke waited a moment. "If he's still unarmed, yes."

Fox smiled. "I figured you'd say that, Smoke. Blood's still thicker than water, isn't it?"

Smoke stared at the Indian, aware of a fleeting shock. "Fox?"

"Don't ask any questions," Fox interrupted. "Just don't ever forget that I made a trip for you, to build a fortress around your name. You remember that for Emily's sake, and for hosts of Blackbird children yet unborn!"

The tingling of shock and swift understanding was still in Smoke as he led out toward the fire. Then, halting behind a screen of alders, Smoke saw the group by the fire distinctly, and everything else in his mind was wiped out.

Grat and Fain were there, lounging back against their saddles. Squatted on their boots on either side of them were Arch and Chain and Huck and Murtch, all darkly silent. Across the fire from them stood a tense group, all strangers to Smoke; eight men, armed with pistols and rifles, but obviously out-of-place and not liking any part of this.

Those eight, Smoke knew, were men who had hovered on the fringes of Fain's and Grat's big project in the Flint District, perhaps taking bribes or passing them on to higher officials. Ruth-

lessly, for this last brazen move, the LeQuires had forced them into the open; and they would be shot, as Ashley had been shot, unless they cooperated.

Smoke's glance shifted to the front of the cabin. Cedar was there, sitting alertly on the stoop of the porch, his dark face turned toward Grat and Fain. His buckskin jacket was open, revealing a portion of his thick black chest. He had never known how to conceal his emotions; and now he was openly belligerent, and that belligerence was directed against the LeQuires.

Smoke's glance searched Cedar's belt line. Cedar was unarmed.

The door of the cabin was closed, and its windows were darkened. Emily was in there, Smoke thought. Cedar was guarding Emily; guarding her against the LeQuires.

The thought warmed Smoke Blackbird. Bad as Cedar had been, he still loved Emily Rogers. Smoke remembered something Reverend Rogers had once said: "Cedar loves her. He wouldn't harm a hair on her head."

Lem Schuster whispered: "I can take Grat's eyes out, from here."

Smoke drew his long muzzled pistol. "Wait, Lem. You and Fox cover me. I'll try to slip up behind the shack and get close enough to warn Cedar."

Fox said in a sibilant whisper: "You don't owe Cedar anything!"

Smoke said softly, "No. It isn't that, Fox. But if we open up on that bunch now, some of them will break for the cabin. If I can get close enough, I might have Cedar rush in and take her out of there, maybe out the back way."

Smoke left them and eased through the timber, his glance never leaving the groups at the fire. Grat was standing now, yawning and throwing his arms up over his head. Smoke halted, watching Grat steadily. Grat dropped his arms and spat into the fire, then hitched at his gunbelt and wheeled around toward the cabin.

Cedar rose from the stoop of the porch, his fists clenched.

For a fleeting second, Smoke's attention was upon Cedar; and during that small space of time Grat LeQuire drew his gun and fired.

Cedar keeled over backward as if a battering ram had struck him, and lay still at the edge of the porch. Sight of his dark, still figure had power to draw Smoke forward. He lunged from the brush and said harshly, "Grat!" and shot Grat twice as he turned.

They were heart shots, and they took Grat swiftly. He fell face forward, his long body groveling an instant in the dirt and flint rocks. One of his huge boots lifted weakly, then dropped and went laxly sideward. Smoke leaped over Grat's body, shooting as he moved.

Fain was on his feet with his gun up when Smoke's bullet struck his middle. Smoke heard Fain scream. Fain took a running step toward the fire and plunged into it, then rolled out of it, still

screaming. With frantic, spasmodic reflexes, Fain was squeezing his pistol's trigger, and one of those wild shots took Arch.

Those eight men on the opposite side of the fire had scattered without shooting. Some of them had dropped their guns. A withering blast of lead from the brush beyond them took some of them down. Smoke knew that Frank Boyd and his companions were shooting.

Smoke centered his gun at Chain, who was down on one knee leveling upon Smoke. Chain fired first, and his bullet struck Smoke's left shoulder, spinning him around.

Smoke went all the way round, righting himself, and saw Fox and Lem racing toward the fire, both shooting. Chain went down.

Huck was flat on his stomach behind Fain LeQuire's saddle, shooting at Fox and Lem. Fox stumbled and fell headlong, his momentum flinging his rifle from him.

Only Huck's eyes and forehead were visible above the saddle. Smoke steadied himself and squeezed the trigger. He didn't hear the click of the hammer because of the noise of other shooting, but there was no rebound against his hand and he knew his pistol was empty. He flung it at Huck's forehead, but Huck was already dead.

"He was mine from the beginning," Lem Schuster said. "I like still ducks. Makes things so easy."

It was suddenly quiet, and that quietness was like an unbearable pressure against Smoke's brain. He wondered if the shock of Chain's bullet was getting to him, but it wasn't that. He saw Reverend Rogers and Hosie Walker coming toward him. To their left, holding his gun trained on the five men who had surrendered, was Lige Crabtree.

Rogers, Walker, Crabtree. Then Smoke saw Frank Boyd walking toward the fire, holding his wounded gun-arm.

Smoke spun around and said softly, "Fox!"

The Indian was flat on his back, dying quietly. Smoke stooped and started to lift him, but Fox shook his head.

"Just . . . one concession, Blackbird," Fox whispered. "Fix a . . . fix a good room up for Sally. She cooks good porkside . . . gravy . . . stew . . ."

Tight-faced, Smoke watched Chuculate die, and then he straightened up and went toward the cabin. Emily was sitting on the porch stoop above the place where Cedar had fallen. Her face was down in her hands, and her shoulders were shaking. Reverend Rogers stood on the earth beside her, one of his lean hands resting against her hair.

Cedar was dead, his dark face resting passively on a widening crimson pillow of spreading blood. Even in the muted glow of the firelight, that blood looked red and clean. Smoke passed on, feeling a touch of the old sickness that no medicine could ever cure.

Emily stood up and met him, wiping at her tear-stained face. "Smoke," she said chokingly, "you're wounded!"

"Not much, Emily. Everything is going to be all right." He was thinking of Cedar, and of a farmer's daughter, weak with terror in a dark woods. He was thinking of dark bodies, maimed and broken, hanging from stable beams. He took Emily in his arms and realized how badly she was shaken. "It's all right, Emily," he said. "You don't have to be scared now."

She said brokenly, "I wanted to live my life so that I could walk even through the valley of the shadow of death, and fear no evil. But there was too much evil loose here! Oh, Smoke, forgive me for the things I said to you! I love you . . . and I want you to stay strong and sure, and quick to destroy those who would destroy you!"

"All right, Emily," Smoke Blackbird said. "I love you too, and I'll see you at the Mission tomorrow. Now dry your eyes, and let the Reverend take you home."

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SMOKE

Smoke Blackbird had been away too long: His father was dying, the Cherokee Nation was divided, Belle Gantry had turned her back on him, and the Lequires had seized the Blackbird farm for themselves, forcing the Indians and settlers off.

And no one seemed willing to fight!

Emily, the Reverend's beautiful daughter said: "Resistance, yes: but it must be the passive kind, the meek and lowly kind."

Chief Blackbird, Smoke's aging father said: "The Cherokee Nation has seen too much bloodshed. Take your claims to the councils."

The weary settlers said: "Those who tried to fight have been forced to hide in the woods like animals. We have our women and children to think of."

There was nothing left for Smoke.

He had to fight alone.

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